Shichikon Den : The Legend Of The Seven Souls

VraieEsprit

Fushigi Yuugi

Complete

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Summary

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Description

Stars are vanishing from the sky over Kounan,& Taikyokuzan is covered by eerie red light. As Tasuki & Chichiri struggle to reset the balance, they realise their dead friends still walk the earth,& that Suzaku's chosen can be a threat to peace...

Chapter 1

七魂伝
The Legend of The Seven Souls.

Shichikon Den: Introduction, Explanation and Disclaimer

I've dotted and darted about a bit with characters from various FY sources for the writing of this story. Some of them are only present in the manga and some in the additional FY novels written by *Nishizaki Megumi* alongside *Watase Yuu*'s artwork and guidance. In the event of anyone not being familiar with some of them, I've done my best to include sufficient explanation in the story about their roles and who they are. For the most part, I hope the story itself wil make that clear. In case of any gaps, however, I've also included info as I've gone along, as a "footnote" if you like to the chapters where they first appear. Obviously this means this story does contain spoilers for the manga, anime and some of the novels. Sorry about that!

Obviously the title is a rip of the style used by Nishizaki Megumi for the thirteen FY novels (lol). Shichi meaning seven (does any fan of FY not know that already, though? Doubtful!), kon (the *onyomi* for tamashii "soul or spirit") and den (for "legend"). It's a bit tacky. But I sort of had to do it. Sorry about that, too.

This is, in some respects, totally not the FY story I thought I was going to be writing. In fact, if you saw some of the discarded FY gabble still on my pen drive, you'd probably wonder how I got from that to this. I certainly do… I've not written a FY fic before, although I've written a lot of Tenchi Muyo stuff and things for other fandoms that aren't posted on FFnet. So in a way it's a first for me and in a way it's not. Hopefully there's not too much, if any, OOC'ness. Guess we'll see as time goes on.

This story has the ambitious intention of being a FY fiction without the involvement of *any* of the four Miko OR the introduction of a new Miko…(At least, Miaka may appear in flashback, and her name will certainly be mentioned. But I thought it would be refreshing to not have Miaka as the central character. Consequently, there's probably not going to be much, if any Tamahome, either. Really, Tamahome to me is like one of those good things you can have too much of… if you know what I mean :) I don't dislike Miaka or Tamahome… but I'd just like to give them a break. If any of the characters can be said to be

“central” to this story, it’s probably Tasuki — although Chichiri has a fairly significant role also. And in essence, it’s really a story about the Suzaku Seishi left in the Shijin Tenchishou world.

At times the tale also might be a bit dark (I say might, I mean will, absolutely and definitely beyond all doubt *will* be dark!) but this is what comes of writing a story when your actual favourite character is dead and buried under Hokkan’s mountain snow (sniff, sniff, sob etc). Resurrecting a character is only excuseable if you have a really, really good plotline explanation for doing it… so at the start of this story, four of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi are dead. (Including Nuriko… waah…) In the end, though, it’s not actually a story about dark, nasty, sad stuff. It’s the opposite, really — well, hopefully that will all come clear as the story progresses. I don’t want to give away spoilers, particularly since my endings have a habit of writing themselves anyhow. I may yet end up at a completely different point than the one I think I’m aiming for.

This story is set after the conclusion of volume 18 of the manga/OVA 2 of the television series. It may also involve vague reference to events in the novels, but as I’ve said, hopefully the story will explain those bits. I’m only including them because characters need backstory from time to time and I wanted to keep it within known boundaries where I could. I haven’t read all of the Gaiden books, and I haven’t got to the end of Sanbou Den yet (Kanji takes time… lol…), so I may still be out on a few things. But I’ve done my best. This is fanfiction, after all, right?

As a general rule, all names involved in my story are the Japanese versions of the character names, so Tasuki is *Kou Shun’u*, Chichiri is *Ri Hou Jun*, etc. This is just because it’s easier for me to remember them in Japanese than it is in Chinese. Also, locations may have adopted their Japanese names — ie Reikaku-zan, Taikyoku-zan, Taichi-ike, Yukigase-mura, Seisen-mura etc. The exception being country names, because for some reason I like “Kounan” better than ‘Kounan-koku’ or (to quote Chiriko) “Kounan-oukoku”. So for simplicity’s sake, that’s what I’ve done. I won’t pretend that English versions of the place names may not have crept in as well, just for variety’s sake!! (A word of warning — I have major left and right issues, so if for some reason Chichiri suddenly has a wounded right eye or Tasuki wings on his left arm, please blink and ignore the error for me, okay? I’ve tried to get it fixed in my mind, but since it took me a week or two to get it into my head that Kutou is east and Sairou is west..I don’t hold out a whole lot of hope for my brain coping too well. Even now I have absolutely no idea which foot Chiriko’s symbol is on… shame on me :S)

Although I really hate Chichiri saying “you know” all the time, “*no da*” doesn’t translate well. So I’ve compromised and done it from time to time… nobody kill me!

Ok. I promise the long boring geek stuff is out of the way now. Story from hereon in…

Fushigi Yuugi belongs to Watase Yuu and not me, usual legal regs etc apply ;)

Synopsis

One world. Four Gods. Twenty eight mansions of the stellar sky.

As Tasuki and Chichiri return to Kounan after their battle against Tenkou, neither of them can imagine that for them, the trouble is only just beginning. First, a blast from the past has turned up at Reikaku-zan, and Tasuki is horrified to discover that Kouji has made a girl welcome in the heart of his mountain stronghold. Anzu is determined that this time she won’t let the fiery bandit escape — but Tasuki is still recovering from the discovery that he’s not as strong as he thought in his resolve against the opposite sex. With the memory of Miaka’s assault still fresh in his mind, he is both confused and dismayed that Anzu does not seem willing to take “no” for an answer!

Meanwhile, Chichiri’s sharp senses have detected the life force of Nuriko, one of the dead Seishi who was meant to have been reborn after the battle with Tenkou. Nuriko’s signal is strong but inconsistant, and when an attempt to reach Taikyoku-zan almost results in both him and Tasuki getting killed, he realises that something much more sinister is afoot. Then Tasuki’s home village is set ablaze, and Chichiri realises how serious things truly are. Somehow the very world that they’ve sworn to protect is rising up against them — sending either a warning or a cry for help as it struggles to regain its lost sense of balance.

For the stars that guard the heavens over Kounan now number one less than they did before.

And unless the chosen of Suzaku can find a solution, their world might cease to exist completely, too…

SHICHIKON DEN
A Fushigi Yuugi Fanfiction
by
VRAIEESPRIT

Prologue

Taikyoku-zan

“Yuuki Miaka and Sukunami Taka.”

Amid the bright, mystical landscape of Taikyoku-zan, an old woman cast her gaze up at the big, glimmering mirror before her, a pensive, thoughtful look in her eyes. “You’ve cheated fate — with the blessing of Suzaku and the luck only love can bring you — you’ve succeeded in bringing together your lives into one world. Now there is no doubt — Sukunami Taka is a man of both worlds, and there is no longer any risk of him disappearing.”

She turned, casting her beady gaze on her companions as she eyed each one of them in turn.

“Chichiri and Tasuki have already been returned to Kounan.” She said softly. “And now… now it’s your turn. All of you. Time for you to leave this place and find your new lives. Each of you will be reborn, as befits a warrior of Suzaku.”

She spread her hands, and a hazy glow bathed the landscape, engulfing each of the four spirits in its warm, comforting grasp. As she watched, they slowly faded and disappeared from view, until there was nothing left on Taikyoku-zan of the seven Celestial Warriors of Suzaku.

The woman sighed, suddenly tired.

“The legend is concluded.” She murmured. “Nyan Nyan, this world is at peace. At last, the four beast Gods have been called, and the evil of the demon Tenkou no longer plagues this place. Everything… everything is as it should be. Everything can begin again.”

The small girl at her right hand glanced up, vivid braids of hair bouncing in an imaginary wind as she nodded her head.

“All well.” She murmured. “All a happy ending, for all the Suzaku.”

“A happy ending.” The woman smiled, amusement flickering in her eyes. “I suppose that’s fitting, for a Priestess who chose to defy fate and a Celestial Warrior who decided to abandon the mould he was cast into, don’t you think?”

Before Nyan Nyan could respond, however, there was a sudden juddering of the ground beneath them, and flickers of strange red light began to glitter across the horizon, dancing in and out of focus as they formed a net-like weave across the landscape. Despite herself, the old woman’s eyes opened wide with alarm and confusion, spreading out her hand to touch the delicate fibres, but they repelled her fingers, and at the sudden burning sensation she drew back.

“This can’t be…” She breathed, even as she heard Nyan Nyan let out a startled yell. She turned, just in time to see the diminuitive goddess fade and disappear in a flash of light, and a second tremor rocked the mountain as the scarlet web became more and more vivid in the sky.

The woman muttered a curse, trying to cast a spell to disperse it, but it was to no avail, simply absorbing her power into itself as it grew in strength and dominance over the Taikyoku-zan terrain. Across the ground, the giant mirror in which she had observed so many events shuddered and cracked from side to side, the glass splintering out across the ground in sharp, glittering shards of energy.

“No.” The woman’s eyes opened wide with horror as she understood the meaning of what was happening. “It can’t be… not after so much… so much preparation, so much care… are you saying… that the tie to this world… can’t be broken after all? Are you saying…”

But she did not finish her sentence, for in a spasm of bright light, she too was swallowed up into the depths of the mountain as the Taikyoku-zan landscape became barren and dark once again.

Across the palace wall, where the seven constellations of Suzaku had hung on the south wall, a crack began to run through the plaster, as chips of the paintwork crumbled and fell away. Slowly but surely the building’s foundations began to give way as the south wall fell into ruins and rubble, dragging the other four walls down with it. The dessicated pieces of the constellations of the four gods littered the mountain landscape, seemingly tainted by blood as they reflected the crimson haze of the barrier that now covered all of the mountain in its glow.

Uppermost in the collapse, one constellation remained oddly intact, the glittering gems that had marked it’s stars dead and cold against the colour of the stone. Had the old woman or her companion been there to see it, they would have known that this was the constellation that led the southern sky.

The sign of the ogre.

Tamahome.

Sairou

There was barely a sound in the sick room, as the young girl knelt down beside the worn pile of fabrics and straw that made up the

single makeshift bed the hut's one room contained. The figure lay silent, her eyes fluttered closed in her pale face, but the flush of her cheeks told her carer that the infection that plagued her had not abated over the course of the night.

Carefully the would-be nurse tore a strip from her skirt, folding it and dipping it into the pail of water she had just collected from the river that ran towards Sairou's capital city. It was cool and refreshing even to her touch, and as she placed the damp cloth across the patient's brow, the eyes opened, staring up in confusion. The girl smiled.

"Don't." She said, as the patient's lips parted as if to speak. "It's all right, Karin. I'm here, and I'll stay, this time. I only went to get fresh water, that's all."

"Anzu." The word was little more than a breath, but the girl heard it, and her smile widened.

"Yes, it's only me." She agreed gently. "Are you feeling a little better this morning, maybe? Does your chest still feel tight? I can try and beg some herbs from the sellers in the market again, if you think they'll help. They did the last time, so…"

"Anzu, stop it." The patient's voice was stronger this time, and Anzu frowned, shaking her head.

"You're the one who should do that." She objected. "Straining your voice will make you cough and then you'll be in pain again. Karin, just lie still, okay? I can take care of you, and I will. So you have nothing to worry about."

The older girl's lips flickered into a faint smile at this, and Anzu felt a thin hand slip out from beneath the makeshift bedcovers, sliding itself into her fingers and squeezing feebly.

"I saw… Raimon… last night." She whispered, and Anzu's eyes widened with surprise.

"Raimon?" She asked. "Karin, that was just your fever. You were really hot last night — you weren't even sure who I was some of the time. That's all."

Karin shook her head slightly from right to left.

"No. He was here." She murmured. "I felt his touch on my face… saw his smile. He was… real."

"Karin, Raimon is dead." Tears glittered on Anzu's lashes at this. "You know that. He died more than two years ago. I'm sorry, but you

know that it's true."

"I think… he came… to get me." Karin coughed, the effort of speaking proving too much, and Anzu was immediately alert, alarm flickering in her dark eyes.

"Karin, stop it! You're going to make yourself worse!"

"It's all… right." Karin managed to catch her breath, offering her sister another faint smile as the grip on her companion's hand tightened. "I can't fight… this fever… any longer. You… aren't getting… any sleep, looking after… me. Or food. You look… worn out. And… and if you go on… we'll both… be… in trouble."

"I'm not going to just abandon you, oneechan." Anzu protested. "You're the only family I have — what on earth do you think I'd do, just walk out the door and leave you behind?"

"I… I think Raimon… was a sign." Karin's eyes softened. "You know… what I mean."

Anzu closed her eyes as the tears spilled down her cheeks, and she shook her head, clasping her sister's hand tightly to her chest.

"No, you're wrong." She said fiercely. "You're not going to leave me behind, do you hear me? We're always together, and that's how it's going to be. We're a team — we've always been a team. In good times and in bad — and I'm not a weak little kid any more. I'm a grown woman and I know I can do something to get you medicine, or… or somewhere better to stay. Even a doctor, if I… if I try hard enough."

Karin's cheeks became shiny with her own tears as she registered the love in her companion's voice, and she sighed.

"It's all right." She murmured. "Stop crying, Anzu. Raimon will be there… waiting for me. I'm not scared of it… so don't you be, either."

"But Karin!" Anzu exclaimed. Karin lifted her fragile, pale fingers to touch her sister's cheek, and Anzu's heart ached as she registered the change in the body of the once lithe, active acrobat. Lack of food and money had stolen away little by little at her strength, as Anzu realised for the first time how often Karin had sacrificed her own meals to ensure her younger sister ate properly, and her tears continued to fall.

"I won't let it happen." She said chokily. "Don't you dare leave me all alone, Oneechan! Don't you dare go and leave me all alone!"

Karin was silent for a moment, and then she shook her head.

"I can't… help it." She admitted. "I'm sorry, imouto-chan. But I

can't. I can't fight this… it's… it's too strong for me."

"Don't be stupid! Nothing is too strong for us to overcome!" Anzu protested, and Karin laughed faintly, sparking off a fresh cough in her chest.

"Stop it!" Anzu yelled. "Stop it, please, Oneechan, stop it! You're hurting yourself — please, stop it!"

"I can't stay with you this time." Karin's eyes flickered with regret. "I wish I could, but… I can't. And you… you have to… to believe in your own strength, not just mine. You have to… to make up your mind for yourself, because I… I won't… I won't be able to protect you or help you any more."

She shifted her head slightly, sending her younger sister a pensive look.

"You should go to Kounan." She suggested softly. "Or does your heart not pull that way any more, little sister?"

"My… heart?" Anzu faltered, then she shook her head. "How can I think of things like that when you're so ill as this!"

"I just want to know you have… someone to go to. That's all. Somewhere… safe." Karin said feebly. "Well? Will you… go to him?"

Anzu sat back on her heels, emotions swirling through her brain as she registered her sister's meaning. She swallowed hard, even as a face flickered through her mind.

"I… I want you to get well, oneechan." She murmured sadly. "That's what I want. And yes, I still love… I still feel that way. But… but… more than that, I want…"

She broke off, and Karin offered her a gentle smile.

"Then go to him." She murmured softly, brushing her sister's tears away as more fell. "You're strong enough now to do that, aren't you? To prove yourself and hold your own in any situation. Raimon will look after me, don't worry about that. But you… you should be in Kounan. You should f… follow your heart. You should have gone back a long time ago — maybe we both know that. But you stayed with me — because we were a team and you w… wanted us to be together. But now… if I'm not there… go to h… him. Follow your heart… and live well, for me."

With that the fingers slipped down against the bedcovers, and Karin's eyes fluttered closed. Anzu bit her lip, anguish wracking through her as she registered the slow, gentle ceasing of her sister's

breathing until the rasping wheeze was no longer audible at all. For a moment, the room was completely silent, and Anzu was certain that time had stood still. Then, as she registered the peaceful smile on her sister's face, emotion wrenched through her anew and she flung herself on her sister's body, crying bitterly without knowing or caring if and when the tears would stop falling.

"Karin." She whispered. "*Karin*! You can't leave me… you *can't leave me*!"

But she knew in her heart that her sister's soul had already slipped away, and as she struggled to swallow her tears, she gazed around the chamber, half wondering in her dazed grief-state whether her sister's lover had indeed come to take her away.

"Karin." She choked, sweeping her sister's long dark hair back from her face. "Even now, you still loved him that much, didn't you? Enough not to be afraid when… when this…"

She broke off, struggling to her feet.

"I will do right by you." She murmured softly. "I will make sure you… you have a proper place to sleep, sister Karin. Even here in Sairou, I promise I'll do it — somehow. And then… and then…"

She bit her lip, as emotion threatened to overtake her anew.

"And then I'll go to Kounan." She whispered. "I'll go… I'll go to Reikaku-zan. And… after all this time, I… I'll find Genrou."

Characters from the "Gaiden" novels…

Anzu - Anzuis a fifteen year old circus performer who, along with her sister, is roped into doing Tenkou's bidding. She took over the Reikaku-zan bandits using the Genbu Shinzaho to control them, but in the end fell in love with Tasuki and swore that she'd train herself up to be able to be worthy of him. (Sanbou Den) (In my story, set 2 or so years on, Anzu is now about 17).

Karin: Anzu's elder sister, also a performer along with Anzu, but two years senior. In love with Raimon, even despite his death. (*Sanbou Den*)

Raimon: Karin's dead lover, who was originally wound up in Tenkou's plot involving the Shinzahou. (*Sanbou Den*)

Chapter 2

Chapter One

The sun was climbing high in the sky above the mountain that morning, as birds wheeled and hovered in the air over the rocky, rugged peaks, calling to one another as they built their nests in preparation for the start of yet another cycle of life. In the gentle morning sunlight, two men sauntered up the mountain path in companionable silence, each one at ease as he absorbed the different sights and sounds that surrounded the infamous blessed mountain, Reikaku-zan.

To an independant observer, that these two misfittish young men could have anything in common would be difficult to believe. One was brawny and tall, a shock of red hair falling in unkempt style over his wolfish, lean features. He was certainly no more than twenty at the most, but there was something that marked him out from other youths his age, and the hint of a sharp-tipped fanged tooth protruded slightly from beneath his lips as he smiled up at the mountain peak. He was dressed sharply, his fine clothing accentuated by a string of beads casually strung around his neck and azure gems dangled from his ears, glittering in the bright sunshine. Strapped to his back was an odd implement that, at first glance, resembled a simple metal fan, and as he walked along, his stride held the easy, confident swagger of one who was alive with energy and impetuosity, ready to jump into the next fray with an enthusiastic yell of triumph.

In contrast, his companion was robed in the garb of an itinerant monk, his bright patterned *kesa*, or cape strung around his body almost as if to conceal the slightly shabby appearance of his other clothing . Despite the gold-edged *shakujou*, or staff that he carried with him, he seemed as agile and lithe as a monkey through the difficult passages of rock and shrubbery, and though he swung it absently from side to side on occasion, it seemed more of an accessory than any kind of useful tool. His features were concealed by the smiling face of a kitsune mask, hiding both his true expression and his age from public view, and his shorn hair was gathered in a rough tail down his back, tied at the nape of his neck with a loose band to keep it out of his way. Atop his head he wore a slightly fraying *kasa* to keep the sun from his eyes, and although his manner was gentle and calm, there was something prepossessing in his demeanour that demanded a

second glance.

And yet, despite the contrasts in their appearances, these two strange figures shared a bond that ran deeper than any shared even by brothers — for as warriors of Suzaku, chosen members of the Suzaku-Shichi-Seishi, they had both risked life and limb to protect their country and their fellow people from harm and damnation. For all their differences, under the arched wing of the firebird God of Kounan, this hotheaded bandit leader and this gentle travelling monk had forged a strong friendship and it was this, even now the battle was over, that had kept them in each other's company as they had returned to their homeland.

"You know, it seems like a long time since I came home."

The redhead was the first to break the silence, gazing up at the mountain peaks as he felt the jolt of coursing, penetrating energy tingle through his nerves. "The mountain is just the same as it was, but each time I come back here I feel like so much has happened. Ya know what I mean? It makes you wonder when the next time will be that Miaka'll come droppin' on our heads an' makin' us run round the country after her."

"I know what you mean." The monk nodded his head, a smile twitching at his lips as he removed the *kasa* from his head, following his friend's gaze. "Now Tamahome's gone to Miaka's world for good, though. The others will be reborn into new bodies with new lives. And you and I…"

"We gotta get on with our own. I know." The redhead sighed, an uncharacteristically pensive look glittering in his beady bronzeish eyes. "Seems a bummer though, to end it all like that. Not seein' Chiriko an' the others again now they're gettin' new bodies an' all. Stupid really, but it feels like we're turnin' our backs on them. There are only two Suzaku Shichi Seishi left now, Chichiri. You an' me. How's that meant to work, huh?"

"Well, we did what we were supposed to do. We raised Suzaku and we saved Kounan. Twice, actually, you know." The monk whose name was Chichiri spread his hands, offering his companion a slight, amused shrug. "What's wrong, Tasuki? I thought you were dying to get back to your mountain and retake control from Kouji after all this time doing Suzaku's work. Did you change your mind?"

"No, I ain't changed anything." The wolf, who went by the name of Tasuki shook his head decidedly. "Jus' seems sad that the party's over. I dunno. It's a whole big bummer, when you look at it. Either I run out

on my Reikaku-zan buddies by fighting for Miaka an' Suzaku. Or now I'm turning my back on my Seishi buddies to be king of the mountain all over again. Makes me feel like a double turncoat, when you put it in those terms."

He reached up to pull the metal fan from its strap, glancing at it with a rueful smile.

"At least this thing is back home where it belongs now, though." He acknowledged. "Without it, the bandits here aren't exactly well protected."

He paused, glancing at his companion quizzically for a moment, then,

"You ain't takin' off right away, are you?" He asked slowly. "I mean, you can an' all. Disappearing around the country is what you do, right? With that weird hat and cape of yours. But if you ain't goin' anywhere specific, you know, you're welcome on Reikaku-zan. After all, you're a Seishi, like me. Even if you ain't a bandit. An' the other's won't mind."

Chichiri's expression broke into a broad smile, giving his kitsune appearance even more of a surreal air as he nodded, twitching his staff so that it jangled playfully in the wind.

"I'm in no hurry to do anything, now." He admitted. "Like you, I'm at a loss, to tell you the truth. I spent a long time training to be Miaka's ally, and learning to be Chichiri. Now I don't even need to be him any more, and I'm not sure what kind of life Ri Hou Jun has planned out for him next. So sure, Tasuki. I'll stick around — at least for a day or two, just to get my bearings and think about what I want to do next. Maybe I'll travel out and see if I can sense where our friends' souls are ending up — but it's been a hard battle and to be honest, a break would be nice."

"Well, relaxing, peaceful breaks don't tend to come in a mountain full of bandits, but considerin' what we've faced against Tenkou and his goons, I guess it'll probably be an improvement." Tasuki offered his companion a rueful grin of his own, exposing his fanged teeth once more as he nodded his head decidedly. "All right, then. Better let these idiots know that Genrou's back — although they're morons if they haven't realised it already. Kouji's getting really lax about security, if he isn't aware that his Kashira's come to call… I guess I'll give them a wake up call with my little toy here, and see if that doesn't spark them into life."

"Who are you callin' lax, idiot?" A voice from above startled them

and Tasuki, who had been preparing to wield his glittering harisen in the direction of an unsuspecting tree paused, his gaze drifting across the landscape until he saw the speaker. Then he grinned, lowering his weapon as he recognised his friend.

“Hi there, welcome to Reikaku-zan.” The man deadpanned. “Well, and hello to you too. My name’s Kouji, and I’m actin’ Kashira of this place till my good buddy Genrou gets back. It’s good to see you, Kouji, and I brought a buddy along too. Any buddy of Genrou’s is a buddy of Reikaku-zan — guess you’d better come on up. Thanks so much, I think I will. You’re most welcome, right this way!”

“You’re still a blockhead, Kouji.” Tasuki snorted, but there was pleasure in his eyes as he greeted his friend, hugging him firmly. “That trick’s not getting any funnier… you should really drop it now.”

“What, and ruin my fun?” Kouji raised an eyebrow, eying his friend in some amusement. “And what was all that about lettin’ mountain security go to the dogs, huh? I knew you were here — we’ve been watchin’ the both of you from a distance for a while. But ambushin’ our Kashira when he’s wieldin’ that tessen isn’t the most rational tactical move in bandit history. We figured two warriors of Suzaku ain’t here to raid the mountain, after all.”

“This time I think I’m probably back for good.” Tasuki disentangled himself, eying the tessen pensively for a moment, then sliding it back into its holding place. “Suzaku and the Miko probably aren’t comin’ back to Kounan. An’ so that’s that, for this lifetime. Now I’m not really Tasuki any more… so Genrou’s back with a vengeance an’ so you’d really better not have let anything fall apart, Kouji!”

“Moron.” Kouji cuffed his companion playfully. “It can’t be any worse than with a bone brain like you in charge.”

Chichiri watched the interplay with some amusement, letting out a chuckle as he folded his arms across his chest.

“Reikaku-zan bandits never really change, you know.” He observed absently, and Kouji cast him a grin.

“You’re Chichiri. The disappearin’ monk, right?” He said frankly, and Chichiri nodded his head, tilting his hat in mock acknowledgement of his identity. “Well, like I said. A buddy of Genrou is a buddy of the mountain’s, so you’d both better come on up an’ eat before there’s no food left in the joint. We had a feast planned for tonight as it was — I guess you followed your stomach all the way back home, huh, Genrou?”

“A feast? Since when?” Tasuki’s eyebrows twitched in surprise, and Kouji laughed, a semi-rueful expression touching his face at this.

“There’s another reason I came down the mountain to greet you. I wanted to give you some, well, advance warning.” He said slowly. “We’ve got a visitor — actually, we’ve had one for a while, probably for the past two or three weeks together. I thought you should be prepared, that’s all — I think they’re wantin’ to see you in particular.”

“A visitor?” Tasuki looked startled, eying his friend in confusion. “On Reikaku-zan? To see me?”

His expression became wary.

“It ain’t my sister Aidou, is it?” He asked cautiously. “She didn’t come follow me up the mountain because I left somethin’ unweeded when I went off chasin’ demons with Tama and the others… did she?”

“Aidou?” Kouji blinked, then laughed, shaking his head. “No, though dammit, Genrou, that sister o’ yours should get herself a husband to kick around and quit chasin’ after you all the time. If the guys knew how much she hen pecks you when you go home…”

“They don’t need to know that.” Tasuki said firmly. “And good. I’m glad it ain’t her. But who, then? I can’t think of a damn other person who’d come lookin’ for me in particular. Noone except Miaka or one o’ the Seishi, but they’re all either gone or reborn or somethin’ now, ‘cept Chichiri an’ me and we’re right here. Who else would come to Reikaku-zan? It’s not like it’s a happy home for travellers — it’s a bandit hideout!”

“Well, she doesn’t seem to be too concerned by that aspect of it.” Kouji admitted dryly, and Tasuki faltered, staring at him in consternation.

“Wait a minute… did you say… *she*?” He asked cautiously. Kouji nodded.

“You’re *sure* it’s not my sister?”

“Genrou, believe me, it ain’t Aidou.” Kouji looked amused. “But whether you’ll be any gladder to see who it is than you would her is anyone’s guess. Still, she’s persistant, and she was determined she wasn’t going anyplace until she’d seen you, so, well, she’s kind of been here on and off waiting for you to come home. If it’d been any guy I’d have sent him packin’ with a flea in his ear, but I ain’t real good at fightin’ off girls an’ besides, I wasn’t sure whether you’d told her to come or what the deal was. I figured, wait till Genrou comes back. Then it’ll all be settled out.”

“Kouji, when have you ever known me to ask a girl to do anything?” Tasuki demanded, as they headed up the rest of the mountain path towards the steep slope that led to the heart of the Reikaku-zan bandits’ lair. “Your trouble is, you’re soft, that’s all. You start letting girls into this place and… have you forgotten what happened to Reirei? Women don’t belong on Reikaku-zan, an’ we both know that. Not even Aidou with her steel fist could hack it with us up here for long and you know it!”

“Reirei?” Chichiri interjected at that moment, startling both bandits by appearing between them and offering them both a curious grin. “Ah, now let me see… do I know who Reirei is?”

“Was.” Tasuki said flatly. “A girl who thought she could play men’s games and wound up getting killed for it. That’s all.”

“A girl who sacrificed her life in battle to get the tessen back for you.” Kouji corrected, sending his friend a glare. “Don’t make so light of it, Genrou. You know that she wasn’t just another girl.”

“Perhaps.” Tasuki paused, his gaze flitting across the landscape towards the hidden pathway between the base and the place where the girl’s tomb lay, and for a moment his gaze softened, belying the harshness of his words. “But my point is, she was a girl and she couldn’t hack bein’ a bandit, at the end of the day. Girls do stupid things like that — they let emotions cloud their judgement an’ then they get crazy, takin’ stupid risks. And they’re just not as strong as men — why did you let any girl up here at all, Kouji? After Reirei, I woulda thought you’d have known better than that!”

Chichiri tilted his head in the Kashira’s direction at this impassioned speech, and had it been possible for the bandits to see beyond the mask, they would have realised that he had truly appreciated the irony of Tasuki’s surprising words. He said nothing, however, merely inclining his head to indicate that he remembered the story.

“Now I think I know what you’re talking about.” He said evenly. “Though really, Tasuki, you should find out who this visitor is before you go jumping to conclusions. You’re always too impulsive, you know?”

“Well, I’m not sure I like surprises.” Tasuki said warily. “Not where girls are concerned, anyway. They’re too sneaky and difficult to figure out… and besides, I just managed to get rid of *one* woman from my life, now Miaka’s gone back to her world for good. I thought here at least was a safe place, and now I find you’ve let some chick come in

and take over the place in my absence!”

“Not quite, though she cooks a mean meal and it’s easy to buy a bandit’s heart through good food.” Kouji admitted. “And she has been here before… it’s not that she’s a stranger to Reikaku-zan. Chill out, will you? You’re back now, and you can put it all to rights. You have the tessen, after all. It’s not like anyone is goin’ to question your decisions.”

Before Tasuki could respond, they had reached the centre of the bandit stronghold and at the sight of Tasuki, several of the men let out yells and cheers, one or two raising brimmed glasses of ale in his direction as they toasted the return of their leader. Despite his earlier unease, Tasuki was clearly flattered and pleased by the reaction to his return, and he grinned, lounging back against the door frame as he took in the scene before him.

“Well, that’s more like it.” He said decidedly. “Genrou is back and boy is he! It’s been too damn long, it really has… I’d forgotten how good it feels to be home.”

“*Genrou*!”

From the centre of the milling bandits, a young, female voice rang out and immediately the clamour dulled to a hush as a slim figure pushed through the heaving male bodies, causing them to part and make way for her as she neatly crossed the floor towards the new arrivals. There was a definite grace to her movement, and as she reached them she stopped, raising her gaze to meet Tasuki’s confused gaze with a pair of sparkling brown eyes.

“You’re finally back.” She said, a warm grin crossing her face and she flung her arms around him, eliciting cat-calls and yells from the assembled bandits and causing Tasuki to momentarily lose sense of what was going on, unable to comprehend what was happening as the girl’s thick dark hair brushed against his cheek. Then, as he registered her body so closely pressed against his, he let out a yelp, grabbing her by the arms and pushing her away from him.

“What the hell are you doing?” He demanded, hot colour flushing in his cheeks as he met the girl’s gaze indignantly. “Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my bandit hideout, huh? And why the hell are you hanging all over me, like we were long lost relations or somethin’ stupid? What’s goin’ on here — did everyone lose their minds or somethin’?”

“Genrou?” The girl pouted, tilting her head as she gazed at him with a sorrowful look. “Don’t tell me you don’t remember me? It’s

only been two years… have you forgotten so easily?”

Tasuki continued to look blank, and in the awkward silence that followed, Chichiri stepped forward, bowing his head towards her as he offered her a smile.

“Anzu-san. It’s been a while.” he said levelly. “You’re quite the young lady now.”

“A… A… Anzu?” Tasuki’s eyes widened at this, and Chichiri chuckled, giving his fellow Seishi an elbow in the ribs.

“Don’t mind him. He’s had his brain frittered once too often in battle, you know?” He said amiably. “Tasuki’s still as thick as two short planks — not everything changes in the course of two years.”

“I did expect he’d at least remember who I was, though.” Anzu looked crestfallen. “I mean, even if it was that long ago, and even if you have been fighting for Suzaku and stuff since. It was… it was only two years. And…”

“Don’t you dare cry!” Tasuki exclaimed, as tears began to glitter on the girl’s lashes. “Don’t be so stupid, you idiot girl! Noone’s forgotten anyone, all right? I just didn’t recognise you, that’s all! Your hair is different, ain’t it? An’ you’re taller than you were before — you were a shrimp the last time I saw you.”

“Well, I’m seventeen now.” At this, Anzu’s smile returned and she spread her hands, casting him an affectionate look. “You’ve changed too, Genrou… but I’d know that red hair anywhere. In a million years, I couldn’t forget what you looked like — you look more like your nickname than ever.”

Tasuki frowned, running his gaze over the young woman who stood before him. It was true, he realised detachedly, that the young girl who had infiltrated his bandit lair two years earlier had grown into a woman over the course of their time apart. The fiesty young girl of fifteen who had so easily wielded the tessen in his face and who had challenged his very position as leader of the Reikaku-zan bandits had evolved into an attractive young woman, her thick dark hair tied in a loose tail over her shoulders, and her cheeks faintly pink from mountain air and exercise. She was dressed in very masculine clothing, obviously in an attempt to better appear one of the bandits, but even despite this there was no mistaking the fact the attire cloaked a very well formed feminine figure beneath it, and Tasuki hurriedly drew his mind away from this fact, meeting her gaze again as he struggled to focus on the situation at hand.

“That doesn’t explain why you’re here, though.” He said quietly. “Or why you’ve been spongin’ off Kouji and the others while I’ve been away from base. We parted company two years ago, Anzu — and you’re a circus performer, you’re not a bandit. You only came here back then because of the demon Tenkou and his plots — why would you come here again after so long? Tenkou’s destroyed now. He’s gone. And there’s no reason for you to be in Kounan.”

“Genrou.” Anzu eyed him reproachfully, then she laughed.

“You really haven’t changed a whole lot, have you?” She reflected. “I shouldn’t be surprised to see it — even after two years fighting for Suzaku, you’re still the same as ever.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Tasuki realised.

“I came to see you of course. Why else?” Anzu shrugged, as if this explained everything. “Aren’t you happy to see me, Genrou? Two years ago we were friends, weren’t we? I mean, after everything — you and Chichiri did help my sister and I a lot, all in all. And when you disappeared, I was a lot angry about it, but Karin-neechan said you’d probably been called by Suzaku again, so I decided that I’d keep doing what I was doing, working hard and then one day I’d come back to Kounan and find you, on Reikaku-zan where we first met.”

She eyed him again, then,

“Are you saying you haven’t missed me at all?” She demanded. Tasuki flinched, then,

“I ain’t thought about it at all.” He said simply, shrugging his shoulders. “Two years was two years, right? A lot’s happened — a guy can’t remember everything.”

“Genrou!” Anzu grimaced at him, and some shred of self-preservation borne out of a long time living with temperamental women caused Tasuki to take a step away from his companion.

“Where is your sister anyway, Anzu-san?” Chichiri asked softly, neatly diffusing the situation with his calm, even tones. “You came back to Kounan on your own?”

“On my own. Yes.” Anzu nodded, momentarily distracted, and Tasuki took the opportunity to put Kouji between him and the young circus performer, still eying her more than a little bit warily. She frowned, dropping her gaze as she twisted her fingers together. “Karin… she… she’s not with me any more. Not at all. She… she died, about two months ago now. In Sairou.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Chichiri said solemnly. “I remember you two were very close.”

Anzu nodded.

“She took sick with a fever after a performance we did not far from the Sairou capital.” She agreed sadly. “I tried to nurse her, but it took to her chest and she didn’t recover. We’d had trouble finding food and shelter for a while before that, actually — someone stole a lot of our takings and we had trouble getting by. I guess she wasn’t strong enough to fight it, in the end. I stayed to see her buried, but then I guess I didn’t know where else to come. So I decided… I decided I should come back to Kounan and find Genrou. It’s not like I have any family looking for me, after all. With Karin gone, I’m sort of on my own.”

She raised her eyes, offering Kouji a smile.

“Kouji-aniki has been good to me, letting me stay here.” She added. “When he knew what had happened with Karin and everything — when I got here, I guess I was exhausted as much as anything. But I told him I’d come to see Genrou, and so he said I might as well stick it out here until you came back. So I have. And here you are… just like I hoped.”

“Kouji, you really do go soft in the head where women are concerned.” Genrou cast his friend an accusatory look, and Kouji spread his hands.

“Hey, far as I knew, Anzu was your woman.” He said defensively. “Not all of us have as short a memory as you, you know. Seemed to me she was as much your woman as any chick ever is. Besides, she came crawlin’ in half dead with cold and exhaustion. Did ya think I was going to leave her out on the mountainside for a real wolf to come rip her to shreds? What kind of a man would that make me, if I’d done that, huh?”

“She isn’t my woman!” Tasuki reacted to this. Then he frowned, eying Anzu anew. “But I guess if it was like that… you couldn’t exactly toss her out, could ya? I mean, even being a soft hearted idiot an’ all.”

“We didn’t know when you were coming back.” Kouji added. “But I was sure you would be, because you always do. And she ain’t just done nothin’, either. Since she recovered from her trip, she’s cooked for us, and she’s damn nimble for a girl, too. She’s pulled her weight around the place, so it’s not been a bother.”

“Yeah, but Kouji, she’s a *girl*.” Tasuki said, pointing out the obvious, and Chichiri laughed.

“Well, fighting alongside Miaka has taught you the difference at least.” He teased, and Tasuki glared at him, reaching a fist out to cuff the monk for his remark. Chichiri was too fast for him, however, disappearing and re-appearing across the other side of the room where he cast a nonplussed bandit a smile, holding out his hand for a mug of the coarse alcohol the other men were drinking.

“Thanks.” He said lightly, as one was provided. “It’s been a long and thirsty journey, you know, and I have a feeling it might yet get even more interesting.”

“So now you’re back, Kashira, what’s the first order of business?” Kouji asked evenly. Genrou frowned, his gaze flitting to Anzu for a moment. Then he shrugged.

“Find something to do with her, I guess.” He said at length.

“So I can stay?” Hope flickered in Anzu’s eyes. “Genrou, do you mean it — you aren’t going to throw me out, are you?”

“I guess… I guess not.” Tasuki sighed gustily, shaking his head. “I mean, not at the moment. But listen, Anzu, this is a bandit stronghold. It ain’t like last time. You don’t have demons on your side or holy talismans to make people do your bidding, right? And you’re a girl. Even dressed up in whatever that is you’re wearin’, you’re still a girl. This place ain’t for girls, and I don’t know why you’re so keen to come visit when you know full well I hate girls.”

“So you hate Suzaku no Miko too, do you?” Anzu demanded, and Tasuki grimaced in her direction.

“I can’t even use the tessen on a girl.” He said disparagingly. “Miaka’s different. She’s from another world so the rules are different — stop being annoying, will you? Kouji said you were cooking, right? Is that true? Are you cooking for the guys?”

“I did last night, and I was going to today, as a thank you for them helping me out.” Anzu put her hands on her hips, poking out her tongue, and for the first time Tasuki saw the fifteen year old spirit he remembered within this older, more elegant form. “But if you’re going to be a jerk about it…”

“If you want to stay here, you can damn well give me a reason why to let you.” Tasuki said frankly. “I’m starvin’ and I’m thirsty, too… I’ve come down from Taikyoku-zan and I really don’t wanna bother about all this right now.”

“Guess this is gonna turn into a full blown domestic.” Kouji smirked, amused at his friend’s total lack of composure, and Tasuki wheeled on him, tessen primed as he did so.

“I can flame *you*, you know, so don’t even think it.” He threatened, although there was no real malice behind his words. Kouji laughed, spreading his hands.

“Anzu, you’d better come with me and do somethin’ about feedin’ the hungry wolf. You won’t get any sense outta him until you do, you know, so you might as well give it your best shot.” He said playfully. Anzu frowned, turning to send Tasuki another reproachful look, but he pretended not to see it, and she turned on her heel, flouncing across the floor of the chamber towards the rear door. Kouji cast his friend a thoughtful glance, then followed her, the door swinging shut behind them.

“I think you hurt her feelings, you know.” Chichiri’s voice suddenly at Tasuki’s elbow made him jump and he turned to see the monk casually sipping his drink, offering him a grin. “You should be nicer to her, Tasuki… she has just lost her sister.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Tasuki sighed. “Don’t chew me out, okay? I’m tired and she surprised me. I’d forgotten all about Anzu and Karin and fighting that stupid boy and his monkey over the Shinzahou. I’ve just got Tenkou firmly out of my system, that’s all. Last thing I expected was to see her pop out of the woodwork. Not forgetting that the last time she was here she tried to take over my perch.”

“Yes, but you don’t think she’ll do that this time, do you?” Chichiri looked mildly surprised, and Tasuki snorted.

“Not if I can help it.” He said frankly. “But you never know with women. They’re sneaky things — look how they get you to do things without you even realisin’ it! Miaka, Aidou, my Mother — I don’t need one of them in the heart of my home territory on top of all that. She’s already got Kouji’s tail between his legs, running around after her because she can cook a few plates of food… why of all places did she come here? I don’t get it. We were friends, sure, but why come seek *me* out after two years? Yeesh, all the way from Sairou? On foot? Is she *crazy*?”

“No, I think she’s in love with you, you know?” Chichiri said casually, draining his glass and setting it down on the nearby windowsill as Tasuki shot him a look of abject horror. “Don’t look at me like that — there are enough girls in the world for one to even be attracted to you, you know.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Tasuki gathered himself. “She’s down on her luck and she hopes she can be a bandit, because she ain’t gonna be in the circus any more. But women don’t belong on Reikaku-zan, and that ain’t gonna change. We tried that with Reirei, when she chose to fight for us against her brother’s gang… and we ended up burying her in the mountains. She was barely grown — not even Miaka’s age. I ain’t going to try the same experiment again.”

He stifled a yawn, stretching.

“But for now I want food and I want drink… plenty of the drink.” He said decidedly. “I’ll worry about her in the morning. For now I’m home and I’m not going to think about it any more!”

“He has a nerve.”

As the bandits ate their meal, punctuated by the loud laughter and raucous drinking humour that often permeated the hideout, Anzu slipped away from the main building, heading slowly and sullenly down the path towards the quiet, peaceful location where the bandits buried their hallowed dead. Alongside the tomb of Hakurou, Tasuki’s predecessor stood another, more recent burial place and Anzu grimaced, then pushed her hand against the doorway, slipping into the cool darkness as she drew some flint from her pocket, striking the tinder and lighting the torch in its dust-coated sconce.

“All men are idiots, you know, Reirei, and especially ones with red hair that think they’re special just because they’re mountain bandit leaders.” She said with a sigh. “They’re fickle and stupid and they forget about things — about us, even. I thought at least Genrou would recognise me — but he didn’t. He remembers we were friends but that’s it — just friends. Could he be any more dense about it? I came all the way here from Sairou based on a memory — I was so sure that coming here would be the right thing to do, and yet… and yet…”

She sighed, sinking down onto her hands and knees as she ran over the conversation in her head.

“I told you I’d take care of him, didn’t I?” She murmured. “But right now I don’t know how to do that. I know you gave me your blessing, Reirei, but I feel I’ve failed you in some way, right at the moment. He really does hate girls — and he really isn’t that glad to see me. But where else can I go? Genrou’s Genrou and he wouldn’t understand if I did try and explain to him how I feel. That he’s the one thing that I had to keep faith in, after Karin died… was it a stupid, girlish fantasy, then? Did I imagine we were closer than we were? Probably. But even

so… I feel kind of let down, now he's back. Like… I was never anything to him at all, despite everything we went through."

There was no answer from the darkness, although the flame flickered slightly in the wall sconce, and Anzu leant up against the cool wall, staring across at the coffin of the young girl as she did so.

"You and I have never met face to face." She realised. "You were dead before I ever came to Reikaku-zan, yet somehow I feel like you and I have a connection. You gave up your life for Genrou — didn't you ever doubt that he would understand what you'd done for him? You loved him, but dammit, didn't you care that he didn't love you in return? I know he didn't — Kouji's told me that. You were like his sister, but nothing else. Yet you did it anyway. I don't know. Maybe you were more of a bandit than I am, considering everything. But the truth is, seeing him again, I know I still have feelings for him. All the things that were there before — all the things I called you on before I recognised them in my own heart — they're still there. No matter how he reacts to me or what he says — even if he is a tactless oaf and even if he does push me away. I wanted to be with him again, and now I know it more than ever."

She rested a hand against the smooth coffin surface, half hoping to hear a soft voice in response, but Reirei's spirit was still that night, and Anzu wondered if she had ever heard the girl's voice at all.

"Perhaps it was imagination." She reflected. "Maybe you never gave me your blessing after all. But I still think that you did, Reirei. That we've become friends, even though we never met. Stupid, isn't it? But because of Genrou, we have a connection… at least you'll listen to me, huh? Even if he's too stupid to do it himself."

The sound of voices outside the door made her freeze, worried that her words had been overheard, and she inched closer to the door of the chamber, pulling it back slightly as she assessed who the interlopers were. Her eyes widened in surprise as she recognised the clear silhouette of the Kashira himself, and then the taller figure of Kouji beside him, even as the merriment and laughter continued in the central base beyond.

"He's not there drinking with the men… he's here, by Reirei and Hakurou's tombs." She murmured. "That's not like Genrou — what's he doing, anyway? Don't tell me he's thinkin' about something, because I just won't believe it!"

"I just wish you'd not done it. That's all." That was Tasuki's voice, the roll of his accent clear and distinctive on the wind, and despite

herself Anzu pressed closer, straining to hear the conversation. “Last thing I needed was to come home to a woman, Kouji, after spending the last damn months fighting to save the sanity of one.”

“I always thought you were fond of the Miaka kid.” Kouji responded, kicking a pebble idly against the trunk of a tree as he cast his friend a curious look. Even in the dim light of the moon, Anzu could make out the tension in the leader’s body, and she frowned.

“It ain’t so simple as that.” Tasuki hesitated before answering, and Anzu was surprised to hear a note of seriousness enter the bandit’s tones. “Listen, Kouji, I ain’t the kind of man who’d take advantage of a woman, right? You know me better’n that. It ain’t something I’d do. Right?”

“Right.” Kouji was clearly confused. “When Reirei first stopped with us, the old boss put her in your room because of that fact. You don’t like girls. What of it?”

There was a moment of silence, then Tasuki spoke in low, faltering tones, and Anzu had to strain to pick up the threads of what he was saying.

“Suzaku no Miko… spell… travelling between… old friend of Chichiri’s.” She managed to make out, and she frowned, pushing the door open further as she struggled to understand. “I didn’t know what I was doing, or what possessed me, Kouji — but it turned me over. I… I guess I didn’t know that person was inside of me. I hate women. We both know that. But…”

Another period of silence, then Anzu saw Kouji drop his hand companionably on his friend’s shoulder.

“I see. Hit you hard an’ fast, an’ you couldn’t do a thing about it.” He said evenly. Tasuki started, then nodded.

“It was a spell.” He said slowly. “But even so… even so… it was part of me, too. I didn’t like it, Kouji. It ain’t me — it goes against everything I am an’ everything else too. I don’t like women, an’ dealing with what happened to Miaka… I tried to make it up to ‘em, an’ I did my best to, somehow. Even so, though, I was ready to blast myself to embers at the time. I don’t betray friends, on top of everythin’ else — what I almost did to Tama, too, acting that way! I jus’ don’t do those kinds of things — an’ now I come back here an’ Anzu’s suddenly showing up and… dammit, I don’t know what to do about her. She shouldn’t be here. This ain’t a place for women!”

“So you love Miaka, then.” Kouji reflected, and Anzu’s eyes opened

wide at this. Tasuki did not answer at first. Then he sighed.

“Dunno.” He admitted finally. “I don’t think… it was that. I mean… hell, I don’t know, dammit. Maybe… it was. Truth is, I really *don’t* know. I’ve never been in that position before, when I’ve felt so… out of my own control. I don’t know what was Hikou’s spell and what was me! An’ if it was me, whether it’s safe for me to even be around women like Anzu. Because if it ain’t, I mean, if it was me…”

“Shut your face, you imbecile.” There was a swing of shadow as Kouji brought his hand neatly down against the back of Tasuki’s head. “You already told me, you ain’t like that. And you ain’t. It was a spell, buddy, so deal with it. And hey, I’m sorry I brought Anzu in on top of everything, but you know, you’re Kashira. You can tell her to get lost, if things are that way.”

“Yeah, for sure.” Tasuki said darkly, and Anzu’s heart clenched as she heard her name. “No, I can’t, not now she’s here. If she ain’t got anywhere else to go — I can’t do that, even to a chick. Until somethin’ else works out for her to go or do, I guess she has to stop here, doesn’t she? But I don’t need to be around her. Not until I know what the hell’s goin’ on with me and my brain.”

“You should spend more time talkin’ to your big brother Kouji, an’ you’d have a better understanding of the female mind.” Kouji bantered, and Tasuki snorted.

“I know how the female mind works.” He said ruefully. “I lived with five of them till I ran away from home to join up here. I ain’t ever been so glad to leave a place in my life, as I was to get away from my Mother and sisters back then. I don’t want Reikaku-zan turnin’ into some hostel for stray women, that’s all. Even aside from my hatin’ them, there are some guys who might get drunk and mess them about a bit — or worse, if we were raided…”

He trailed off, and Kouji nodded his head.

“That’s why I took the trouble to teach Anzu a few safety tricks.” He admitted. “But yeah, I know. And after Reirei…”

“Reirei.” Tasuki’s eyes flitted in the direction of the girl’s tomb, and Anzu held her breath, hoping against hope they wouldn’t notice the open door. Then he turned away, shrugging.

“Well, Anzu’s here now, so I guess that’s that.” He said wearily. “And I’m beat. I need sleep, then maybe I’ll think clearer about everything.”

He paused, then,

“Don’t mention what I said to Anzu, or the others.” He added. “About… Miaka, an’ all. Chichiri — he knows, of course. But I don’t think he’ll mention it. I mean, well, there ain’t much about one another we don’t know, now, considerin’ everything.”

“You can trust ol’ Kouji-aniki to keep it under wraps.” Kouji assured him. “But really, Genrou, it was a spell. Don’t let it torture you. If you were that kind of guy, Reirei would never have been safe spendin’ so much time with you, and dammit, feeling about her the way I did, I wouldn’t have let you spend so much time that close, either! It ain’t your way, to do things like that. So don’t think it’ll happen over… besides, Miaka’s different, ain’t she? Being from another world and all. An’ I don’t know… Anzu mightn’t be fightin’ it, if you chose to move in that direction.”

Anzu’s cheeks coloured hotly at this, and it was all she could do not to burst out of her hiding place and slap Kouji roundly across the cheek for his remarks. Tasuki laughed, however, shaking his head.

“Let’s go back and enjoy the night. Get a few drinks, and just hang out.” He said finally. “That’s where we should be, after all.”

“Sounds good to me.” Kouji agreed. “But hey, you know I’ve always got your back, right? No matter what — you can trust me.”

“Hell, I know that.” Tasuki responded. “I’ve missed Reikaku-zan, you know. It’ll be good… good to be back here properly now that all the Miaka madness is finally at an end.”

With that they drifted out of earshot, and Anzu sank back against the wall, absorbing everything she’d heard.

“Something happened between Genrou and the Miko and he doesn’t want people to know about it. Something he’s ashamed of, which means…” She trailed off, her eyes widening. “No, he couldn’t! Could he? *Did* he?”

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I’m so confused. I wish I hadn’t eavesdropped.” She admitted out loud. “They say no good comes of it, and it’s true — but when they were so close and with Genrou so serious — he’s never that way, so something’s on his mind. I don’t know… I wish I could help him, and yet I’m damn mad at him, too. Reirei, why is it such a mess, being in love with a blockhead like him?”

A faint breeze blew through the chamber, teasing at the torchlight once again, and this time Anzu was almost sure she could hear a faint breath of a voice on the wind.

"*Have faith in him.*" Was what she thought it said. "*I'm counting on you.*"

Anzu got slowly to her feet, resting her hand once more on the coffin.

"All right. I'll try." She said quietly. "Thanks for listening, Reirei. As always. I'll try not to let you or him down. After all, I'm not a quitter. Karin believed she'd be with Raimon again, so she wasn't afraid of dying. And I believed I would be with Genrou, so I tried not to be afraid of coming here, even though it was such a long journey and so many times I could have given up. I'll try my best to keep faith with him, and hang on in there. Maybe I can find a way to help him. After all…"

She faltered, a slight flush touching her cheeks as she contemplated the conversation.

"After all, whatever it means, it sounds like Genrou's realised he's a man, and that he definitely likes women." She murmured. "And he doesn't hate me, which means there has to be a chance I can bring him around, surely? I just have to believe in myself and keep focused. No matter what — I will stay with him this time, no matter what!"

Characters from the "Gaiden" novels…

Reirei - the sister of a rival bandit leader, Kieron of Kaou-zan. Despite her brother's twisted attitude and untrustworthiness, Reirei is pretty straight down the line. Loved by Kouji, she in turn falls for Genrou and winds up sacrificing her life for him to get the tessen back from demon hands. Despite her death, and the fact they never met, Anzu and Reirei have a close bond through their mutual love of Genrou and her grave is frequented by both Anzu and Kouji. She exists in the Genrou Den novel and is mentioned in Sanbou Den also.

Hakurou — Tasuki's predecessor as Kashira of Reikaku-zan's bandits. (You haveta wonder if the "*Haku Rou En*" spell Tasuki uses in the animated OVA is actually a fleeting reference to this guy, the tessen's former master, or if it's just a coincidence!!)

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

There was a cold northerly wind blowing across the fields and valleys surrounding Yukigase-mura that morning.

In the chill breeze, a small girl of four or five hovered around the clustered knots of trees that cloaked the mountain path from view, collecting the discarded shells of various nuts and shed bark as treasures as she sat playing in the morning light. Not far away, an older boy of maybe six or seven was watching over her, his expression sober and serious with adult responsibility as he ensured that not even a small stray puppy came too near his oblivious junior, and the sound of her laughter carried across the village as the people began to stir for a new day.

From the shadows that hid an old, derelict hut from sight, something stirred, confusion flickering in dark, clouded eyes as he surveyed his surroundings uncertainly. The cold weather pierced through his thin, flimsy clothing and he wrapped his arms around his body with a shiver, stumbling to his feet as he tried to work out where he was.

And even, for that matter, *who* he was.

As he tripped and faltered his way down towards the child's playground, his shadow loomed large over the barren ground and with a shriek of surprise, the small girl scattered her treasures, turning to stare at the newcomer with wide, uncertain eyes. Immediately her brother was on the alert, blocking the path between his junior and the newcomer with outspread hands that nevertheless shook a little at the thought of confronting a monster from the mountains.

After all, it was easier to kill a monster than it was to kill a legend.

At the sight of the children, the man stopped, blinking in surprise as he absorbed the scene before him. At his hesitation, the little girl ran to her brother's side, peering at the stranger uncertainly from behind the folds of his raggedy clothing, and something in the innocence of this sibling love jerked through the man's heart in a twisting, disconcerting way. For no apparent reason, he felt tears spring into his eyes and he swallowed hard, forcing them back as he felt a lump rising in his throat.

“You’re not going to hurt my sister!” The boy said boldly. “Because I’m gonna protect her, and if you try… if you try…”

The man turned a bewildered gaze back to the elder sibling, and at this, the child’s courage gave out, and his words petered out to silence. He did not shift his stance any, however, and for a moment the two just stared at one another, equally wary and equally confused. In the silence, the tears that had threatened began to slowly run down the man’s cheeks, and he touched his skin at the foreign sensation, dashing them away as yet more fell.

Finally, the little girl seemed to summon her courage, scooping up some of the discarded shells and stepping shyly forward. Ignoring her brother’s attempts to call her back, she inched towards the newcomer. Without a word, she held out her hand to him, a cluster of shells across her palm, and something in her hopeful expression brought the man to his knees. With trembling fingers he accepted this gift of innocence, taking it and glancing at it as he struggled to work out what it was about this scene that had afflicted him so greatly.

At length, the boy seemed to realise that this odd being meant them no harm, and he shuffled forward to his sister’s side, slipping his hand into hers.

“Are you lost, ojisan?” He asked frankly, breaking the pensive moment with his brusque, boyish tones. “You’re not from round here, are you? I don’t know you, but if you came from the mountain path you must be lost. Noone comes that way now… nobody ever goes up there, not since the demon was killed.”

“D… demon?” At length the man found his voice, staring at the boy with uncomprehending eyes, and at the gentle, lilting tone of his voice, the child’s brows knitted together.

“Hey… you… are you a… *woman*?” He asked uncertainly. “Because you… you kind of sound… like a… a lady.”

“I… don’t know.” The man seemed surprised. “I can’t remember… anything. I don’t know where I am, where this is, or what… what my name even is. I don’t know anything at all.”

“Why were you crying?” The little girl asked curiously. “Why are you sad?”

“I… don’t know that, either.” The man sighed, rubbing his temples as the world suddenly seemed a very full and complex place. “I’m sorry. I’m not making much sense, not even to myself.”

“Miya-chan, run and get Papa, quickly.” The boy seemed to make

up his mind. “I’ll stay here and make sure he… he doesn’t do anything to hurt anyone, okay? I’ll protect you and everyone, but you go get Papa and he’ll know what to do. You know he will — go quickly, and find him out!”

The small girl nodded her head, darting off into the streets and passageways of Yukigase and the boy was left alone with his odd companion, watching as the stranger dropped down onto a nearby rock.

For a while there was silence, then the boy spoke again.

“It’s pretty stupid, you know, to forget your name.” he said, with all the simplicity of a young child. “Why did you go and do that for?”

“I…”

“You don’t know, do you?” The boy frowned. “You’re really weird, you know. Comin’ out of nowhere and crying and not even knowing who you are or if you’re a man or a woman.”

He eyed his companion in sudden fear, as an idea dawned on him.

“You… you’re not a demon, are you?” He asked anxiously. “You haven’t come… to eat us?”

“Eat you?” The man was floored for the second time. Then he shook his head, managing a feeble smile.

“I don’t think so.” He said ruefully. “I might not remember who I am, but I’m pretty sure I don’t eat people.”

“That’s good, then.” The boy said seriously. “Papa wouldn’t like it, if I was talking to someone who ate people. It happened before, you know — a man in the village had a wife who did that kind of thing. She died, though, and everything was quiet after that. I don’t really remember that, though. It happened a long time ago — I don’t know what really went on, not all of it. We didn’t live here then — we came here later on. Mother doesn’t think it’s a story we should hear till we’re older, either, though I wouldn’t be scared, if she did tell it to me. I’d like to know about the demon, because I have to protect Miya, and if I know what they’re like, I’ll be able to do that. Won’t I?”

“What’s your name?” The man asked softly, and the boy drew himself up to his full height.

“Ryuuen.” He said importantly. ‘My name’s Ryuuen. It means “dragon’s fire’, because my dad and mum, they came here from Kutou after there was a war or something. And anyway, they live here now. But I’m called it because of the dragon who protects Kutou. My Dad

saw him, you know. The real Seiryuu. And Seiryuu protects Kutou, so I have to protect Miya, too. Because that's what dragons do."

"Ryuuen?" The man's face whitened as he slowly repeated the name, and the young boy stared at him, tilting his head on one side as he struggled to work out the change in his companion's demeanour.

"Yeah." He agreed. "Ryuuen. See, I know how to write it, too. Look. It's like this. My Papa taught it me, because when he worked in Kutou, he was a scribe and he did a lot of writing stuff. Of course, when the war happened, he had to leave… so he doesn't do that any more. But he still taught me how to write my name. I'll show you."

He bent, scraping the characters in the dust, and his companion's eyes narrowed as the man ran his gaze over the letters.

"Funny." He murmured. "I thought… it might have something to do with… willow trees."

"Willow?" The boy stared at the man as if he truly was mad. "But they don't even grow in Yukigase. I don't know if they grow in Kutou — I don't remember. But that wouldn't make any sense — why would it be to do with willow?"

"I… don't know." The man faltered. "I just… for a moment…"

He paused, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"I felt like it meant something." He said at length. "I guess not. I'm sorry. You're right. Your way of writing it makes… a lot more sense."

"Ryuu-kun!"

A man's voice interrupted the conversation, and both boy and stranger glanced up at the sound of it, a mixture of expressions crossing both faces. The speaker was in his thirties, and at first glance the interloper could tell he was both intelligent and gentle, although the state of his attire indicated that it had not been easy, leaving everything in the desolate lands of war torn Kutou for a new life in Kounan. As he reached them, his little girl trailing after him, he offered the stranger a warm smile, holding out a hand.

"My daughter tells me you're lost, and that you came out of the mountain." He said kindly. "You look tired and you must have come a long way. Is there anything we can do to help you? My little girl seemed to think something was wrong with you."

"He started cryin' when he saw Nii-chan and me." The girl, whose name was Miya, added in her soft, reedy tones. "Like he was real sad about something, but he didn't know what it was."

“I can’t remember anything at all.” The stranger admitted. “Not even… not even my name.”

“Well, I can tell you mine.” The children’s father said evenly. “I’m Haku Dai, and if we can do anything to help, we will. We were strangers ourselves here, you have to know that — in the war between this country and our own homeland, our entire settlement was torn apart and my family were turned on by soldiers, so we had to flee for the border. Fortunately we were able to find kind people in Kounan who’d help us despite our Kutou roots… and if we can do anything at all to repay that debt to another traveller in need, we’re more than willing to do so.”

“You’re kind.” The stranger stood up stiffly, returning the smile. “I don’t have anything I can offer you, though… I don’t want to be… a burden.”

“Believe me, it’s all right.” Dai assured him warmly. “As I said, it’s a matter of doing for another what the people of this village did for us when we first came here. That’s all.”

As they headed towards the ramshackle building that comprised the Haku home, Dai murmured something in his son’s ear, sending him flying off through the village at top speed. Then he turned, offering his companion another smile.

“My son’s gone to speak to the head of the village.” He explained. “They’re an unusual family, to be honest, but kind and generous. If you can’t remember anything about yourself, you must have been in an accident or a battle somewhere — although you don’t look hurt. Either way, if there’s anything to be found by way of tracing your family, I’m sure that they’ll be the ones to help. I know the Elder’s son has friends in the capital — at least, so I’ve been led to believe.”

“The capital?” The stranger looked blank, and Dai grinned.

“Eiyou.” He responded. “Kounan’s capital. It’s quite a trek away from here, to be honest… I guess you didn’t come from that far afield, huh?”

He cast a glance back towards the mountains.

“Actually, I wondered if you came from Hokkan way.” He hazarded. “If you really did come through the mountain path. People in this village have all kinds of superstitions surrounding those peaks, though — you might not want to tell them you came via that way. Apparently there was some business with a demon a few years ago… my wife knows more of the details of it than I do, I confess.”

“Your son mentioned a demon.” The stranger acknowledged, shivering suddenly as if a cold chill had run all the way down his spine. “But I’m not it. At least, I’m pretty sure I’m not. I don’t… feel like a demon, anyway.”

“The demon was killed by a warrior of Suzaku, or at least, something along those lines.” Dai said with a smile. “There’s no demon now. Even the place has collapsed beneath the weight of the snow — or maybe the force of the battle, I’m not sure which it was. Either way, Yukigase is safe and peaceful. People still mumble about the stories and shadows on the hills — but there haven’t been any incidents since my family have lived here. It’s not an easy life, so close to the border and with it being so cold most of the year, compared with the rest of Kounan. But compared to what we left behind, it was paradise.”

“You seem to have suffered a lot.” The stranger’s eyes softened. “I appreciate you wanting to help me. It’s kind of you, really, considering you don’t know anything about me.”

“Well, when we left Kutou, we took a long way around to get here.” Dai said reflectively. “You have to understand, my younger sister was… was a chosen one. A daughter of Seiryuu, or whatever it is they call it. And when everything collapsed, people blamed the relatives of the Seiryuu Shichi Seishi for failing Kutou and for following selfish ends instead of finding peace for our country. My sister and I — we were seperated when she was twelve, and I didn’t really see her again after that. But even despite that, we were hunted down and driven out of our home. Everything I’d worked for, to support my wife and my children — just gone, just like that. Even if Kaen did fail Seiryuu and Kutou, the aftermath was a bloodbath. We were lucky to escape with our lives.”

He looked pensive.

“We came through that mountain path, from Hokkan.” He added. “A young farmer’s boy told us the way into Kounan and that we’d be safe there, now that the war was ended. So we came here, and that was that. Considering all the people who helped us to get here — why would it be strange that I’d want to help you? For all I know, you’re one in the same boat as me.”

“I wish I knew for sure.” The stranger admitted.

“Perhaps with some rest and a warm meal, your memory will return a little.” Dai suggested. “We don’t have much to offer, but we’ll gladly share it with you.”

Before his companion could respond, there was the sound of hoofbeats, and Miya let out a yell, diving behind her father as a horse pounded avross the street towards them. The rider reined in his steed, although as the stranger raised his gaze to take in the newcomer's appearance, he realised that defining the man's gender was not a simple thing. Although well built and clearly brawny, the figure in the saddle had his hair bound up like a woman's, thick makeup coating his eyes and rouging his lips, giving him a decidedly surreal appearance. He was robed in expensive fabric gowns, which somehow the stranger knew without asking had been imported from a supplier in a bigger city, because of the quality and weave of the cloth. As he steadied his horse, this apparition made to speak to the father of the two small children, but as his gaze fell on the interloper's face, his face whitened considerably and he gripped the reins more tightly between his thick fingers as he struggled to absorb what he was seeing.

For a moment, nothing moved. Then, in a hoarse whisper, the rider murmured,

"*Kourin*?"

Well, at last there was some semblance of peace and quiet.

Chichiri managed a rueful smile as he clambered upwards along the slopes of Reikaku-zan, heading towards the mountain's peak. As he walked, he hummed absently under his breath, swinging the *shakujou* from side to side as he relished just being outside with the elements after so long fighting battles.

"I hadn't realised how much I'd missed just existing under the sky." he reflected. "Still, though, Tasuki is right about one thing. Being separated from everyone is a strange sensation — not as easy to take as I imagined it would be. I wonder when the transition really happened — when I stopped wanting to be alone and when I started enjoying travelling with company. Still, Reikaku-zan isn't all seething with bandits… and whatever else I might be, a bandit I am definitely not."

He settled himself on a rock beside the trickling meander of a stream's source, reaching up to remove the mask from his face as he splashed the cool, refreshing liquid over his scarred skin. Though it had been some years now since the Shouryuu flood which had wiped out all of those dearest to him, the reminder of the day's events still criss-crossed cruelly across his expression, and where his left eye had once been, there now existed a sharp, jagged mark. It had become

almost prophetic, in a way, he reflected pensively, touching the scar absently as he regarded himself in the rushing water.

“The left eye and the right eye are separated, just like Hikou and I were that day.” He murmured aloud, startling a nearby bird who had hopped too near to him in a search for food. “The scars always remain — always. But I never realised… left on its own, the right eye grows stronger. It learns to compensate — and so have I, by becoming Chichiri and living this life. Five years ago I never would have thought that I could look at it this way — but at last, I think, I’ve put the flood fully behind me.”

He stretched back, leaning against his hands as he gazed up towards the clear blue sky.

“I hope Mitsukake and the others have happy futures, reborn into new lives and bodies.” He reflected. “And that the same is true for Hikou and Koran, now that the matters between us have been settled properly. I don’t bear anyone any ill will any more, not even myself. So I hope that the same is true for them… and that Suzaku’s power extends that far.”

He smiled ruefully, remembering the chaos earlier that morning before he had left the bandit hideout to trek further into the wilderness at the top of Reikaku-zan. Despite their long journey and his only having returned to his perch the day before, Tasuki had been adamant about being directly involved in collecting toll that day, and he and a group of his men had been preparing themselves for the scramble down when Anzu had appeared, dressed once more in the clothing of a male bandit as she had rubbed sleep from her eyes. A dispute had ensued, during which Anzu had demanded to be able to go along on the little excursion — to gain experience of being a bandit — and Tasuki had been firmly against it. In the argument that had followed, Tasuki’s usual lack of tact and delicacy had in the end decided things, and after a thoughtless, careless dismissal of Anzu’s presence, he had wound up with a slapped cheek as the girl had stalked off towards the sleeping quarters in high dudgeon.

“Not everyone changes with the passage of time and experience, I suppose.” He decided. “Tasuki will always be Tasuki, no matter how old he lives to be. Perhaps that’s why Suzaku keeps him around — so that one day he might, finally, eventually learn a little bit of tact.”

“Chichiri?”

As if she had heard his train of thought, a voice from the bushes startled him and he turned, inwardly berating himself for letting his

guard down. Anzu stood not far away, still dressed in the garb of a bandit of the mountains, and her eyes were faintly red around the edges, as if she had been crying. She offered him a slight smile, however, and Chichiri returned it, beckoning for her to come sit down. Anzu hesitated, then did as she was bidden, folding the flapping fabric of the too large trousers beneath her as she sank down onto a rock with a sigh.

"He went without me, in the end." She said frankly, and there was no need for her to explain who 'he' was. Chichiri nodded.

"You shouldn't take it to heart." He advised with a casual shrug. "Tasuki doesn't understand things that are right in front of him. He probably didn't mean to upset you. He just… he has a big mouth, you know? And he uses it a lot more than he uses any part of his brain."

"I know." Anzu drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them tightly as she considered her companion's words. "And I didn't come into the mountains for everyone to feel sorry for me. I came here because I felt I had to. Just he's been really cold to me, since he got back yesterday. And I know I don't have any right to expect him to be any different — even if we were friends two years ago. But it annoys me more than it should. I thought maybe he'd grown up — but I suppose… not."

Chichiri's good eye flickered with thoughtfulness, and he shook his head.

"I think he has." He said slowly and carefully. "But not in all ways."

He spread his hands.

"Are you going to stay in the mountains then, Anzu?" He asked lightly. "If Tasuki is so much of a bother for you?"

"Where else do I have to go?" Anzu shrugged helplessly. "When Karin died, this was the only place I knew of to come. But we're friends too, aren't we, Chichiri? And you came here as well, so it isn't just me, is it? You don't want to be on your own either — that's why you came to Reikaku-zan. Just like me."

Chichiri's expression broke into a broad smile and he shook his head.

"I came to Reikaku-zan because I felt like it." He said evenly. "I'm not afraid of my own company. Sometimes I prefer it, in fact. But with all of our comrades gone now — either to Miaka's world, or to new lives — I think it's down to Tasuki and I to keep in contact, at the very least. I won't stay here — I'm not a bandit, and I don't want to be one.

But it's a little soon to be parted completely. Suzaku has been a big part of both our lives for more than two years now. Breaking that seems strange. That's all."

"Well, he probably doesn't mind it that you're here." Anzu said bitterly. "Since you're a man, and all."

Chichiri's expression softened, and he nodded.

"True." He acknowledged.

"You know the Priestess of Suzaku well, don't you, Chichiri?" Anzu shot him a questioning glance, taking him somewhat off guard with the searching look in her eyes. He nodded his head again.

"Yes, of course." He agreed. "What about it? Miaka's gone back to her world for good now."

Anzu glanced at her fingers, a red flush creeping up her cheeks and for a moment there was silence. Then, at length, she raised her gaze once more to the monk's.

"I think I'm jealous of her." She admitted. "Even though I thought I wasn't. Genrou says he hates women, but I think he's a liar. He doesn't hate them at all. He's just scared of them. That's all. But… but I got the feeling…"

She sighed heavily.

"I eavesdropped on a conversation he and Kouji-aniki were having." She admitted. "And I think… did Genrou… and the Priestess… were they… lovers?"

Chichiri's eyebrows shot up at this, and he shook his head emphatically.

"Not in this lifetime or the next, I imagine." He said firmly. "What gave you a crazy idea like that? Miaka and Tamahome went through hell and high water to be able to keep their love together — certainly Miaka loved all of us, but she only kept that particular kind of feeling for Tamahome and noone else."

He tilted his head, eying her carefully.

"Just like you feel it for Tasuki." He added softly. "But there's no reason to be jealous of Miaka."

"Maybe not." Anzu's blush deepened. "But even if what you say is true, it sounded like… Genrou… loved her. And… I suppose I don't know… what to do about that, if it's true. Even if this Miaka Miko is gone… I don't know how to compete with the Priestess of Suzaku.

And he's so damn stupid. He doesn't get it… he doesn't get it at all."

Chichiri smiled.

"But that's Tasuki." He said evenly. "I have no idea whether or not he fell in love with Suzaku no Miko, Anzu. Only he knows that. But all of us Seishi have a strong, unrelenting connection to our Priestess. Whether it's Suzaku's power of love or something more human, I don't suppose any of us can tell you. But Miaka's bond with us enabled warriors to return even from the dead to defend her. She wasn't like any other person I've ever met, in many, many respects. Are you sure you're not just confusing Seishi loyalty with something else?"

"I don't even know, but you saying that makes me feel it's twice as difficult to compete with her." Anzu sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "I guess I thought I understood Genrou — that I knew him, at least, and the way he was. That yes, he can be tactless and stupid, and all of those things. But that he's also brave and impulsive and loyal and… a lot of good things, too. What I wasn't prepared for was a Genrou who doesn't know his own feelings about another woman. That's all. He and Kouji — they discussed it, I heard them. And he said it himself… he didn't know."

Chichiri was silent for a moment, and all that could be heard was the call of a mountain bird as it wheeled and danced overhead. Then, at length, he turned his scarred face to hers.

"If you really love someone, you don't give up on them." He said softly. "That's what having this scar has taught me most of all. If you have faith in someone, you keep that faith — no matter what. Otherwise, how can you say what you feel is important, if you don't believe in it wholeheartedly? Tasuki's feelings are Tasuki's feelings. Yours are yours. Define those, before you try and impress them on someone else."

Anzu's eyes opened wide with surprise and comprehension, and then she smiled slightly, nodding her head.

"I suppose you're right." She agreed. "You know, you and Tasuki do make an odd pair, Chichiri. You're so smart and he's such a moron. How did you ever manage to work together?"

Chichiri chuckled.

"I'm rather fond of that moron, you know?" He said matter-of-factly, reaching to scoop up his discarded mask. "Besides, we balance one another out. I have a bad habit of focusing too much on implications — Tasuki just dives right in, and it helps make light of a

situation that may otherwise be difficult to face. I can't really explain it — but even a moron has strengths too."

"I guess I know that." Anzu flushed once more. "I… didn't really realise until I saw him yesterday how strong my feelings for him have gotten, that's all. It took even me by surprise, although I always said I'd come back, when I felt I was stronger. Travelling here from Sairou on my own — it wasn't easy. But I suppose I always believed that at the end of it, I had somewhere to go. And I know he won't throw me out of the mountain if there's nowhere else for me to go. But he doesn't really want me here, and I hate that it's come to that kind of a situation. That's why I'm jealous of Miaka-sama, really. Because he didn't mind spending time alongside her, fighting to save Kounan. But he seems to want to avoid me, or even ignore the fact I'm here. But I… I'll think about what you said. About having faith in my own feelings. And I'll go from there."

Chichiri's eye twinkled at this, and he nodded, carefully returning his kitsune mask to his face as he did so.

"You know, Miaka and I have had similar conversations in the past, about things like this." He reflected absently. "Perhaps you aren't so different, after all."

"Oh, come on." Anzu snorted. "What does a circus acrobat have in common with a Priestess? I know you're trying to make me feel better, Chichiri, but that's just ridiculous."

Chichiri opened his mouth to respond, then frowned, gazing up at the sky as a sudden sensation raced through his senses. He drew his brows together, struggling to make sense of what he had felt, and he scrambled to his feet, focusing his attention and his energy on relocating the signal. It was to no avail, however, and he sighed, shaking his head in frustration.

"Chichiri?" Anzu's voice brought him back to the present and he glanced down at her, taking in her confused expression. "Is something wrong? Did I say something to offend you?"

"No. No, nothing you said at all, don't worry." Chichiri hastened to reassure her. "I just thought I sensed something on the wind, that's all. Something familiar… but it's gone now, and I can't find it again."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe it was imagination." He added cautiously. "My senses have been less primed since we got to the mountain, that's for sure. I was so caught up in my own thoughts earlier that I didn't even feel you

coming until you were practically on top of me, and that hasn't happened for a long while. But this was… different. Like I was meant to feel it… even if just for a brief moment."

"I don't really understand, but so long as it's nothing bad." Anzu frowned. "Genrou and the others aren't in trouble, are they?"

"No. It wasn't that." Chichiri shook his head. "But I do need to go back to the mountain base and speak to him, when he returns from collecting toll. Will you walk back with me, Anzu? I imagine one of you owes the other an apology, anyway."

"I think I'll stay here a while longer." Anzu shook her head. "Let myself — and him — cool off. He wants space from me, anyway. That's more or less what he said — that if I really wanted to help him lead his bandits I should get out of his face. I will come back down, don't worry — I think I just need to ponder over what you said to me a little. That's all."

"All right then. I suppose that's sensible." Chichiri smiled. "In which case, I'll take the quicker route. See you later, Anzu. Try not to take things too much to heart, all right?"

With that he scooped up the *kasa* hat that had dangled carelessly on the lower branch of a tree, offering her a playful grin before disappearing into it's darkness. As he re-emerged further down the mountain, he registered the sound of voices and an amused look touched his features as he saw Tasuki and his companions heading back towards the main base. They were carrying something, and Chichiri knew that their usual morning antics had been a success.

"Yo, Chichiri!" At the sight of him, Tasuki raised a hand. "You should've come down the mountain with us this morning! I swear, you'd never have seen a more ugly merchant passin' through these hills. So much damn treasure stacked in his pockets he made Eiken look like a water nymph! He had the nerve to insult us and the mountain, too — I left him thinkin' a little about that."

"I suppose the people in the villages below will do well, then, from this." Chichiri told him lightly, and Tasuki nodded his head.

"It was good to be a bandit again." He agreed merrily. "I told you. You should come next time."

"I don't think that I'm cut out to be a bandit." Chichiri laughed. "But no, actually, Tasuki, I'm glad you're back here. Your timing is, for once, perfect, you know?"

"My timing?" As Tasuki gestured to his comrades to convey the

treasure inside, he cast his friend a confused look. “What do you mean? Timing for what?”

His eyes narrowed slightly, as he glanced around himself warily.

“This ain’t to do with Anzu, is it?” He asked softly. Chichiri grinned, shaking his head.

“No. Anzu’s taking a walk further up the slope. It isn’t about her.” He assured his companion and the redhead sighed, relief clear on his face.

“That’s something.” He murmured. “All right then, what? Something happen while I was away?”

“No… not really.” Chichiri shook his head.

“Then what?” Tasuki was confused. “You’re not making a lot of sense, you know that? Even for you.”

Chichiri looked rueful.

“It might be nothing important.” He said slowly. “But… for a moment… I thought I felt Nuriko’s chi. That’s all.”

“Nuriko?” Tasuki, who had been all prepared to go back towards the main hideout himself paused, eying the monk in surprise. “But…”

“That’s what I thought.” Chichiri agreed. “It’s strange, don’t you think? It was so strong, just for a moment. And then… gone. Like it was never there at all.”

“Well, I suppose it’s not that weird.” Tasuki frowned. “I mean, they’re all gonna be reborn, right? So I guess it’s natural for you to feel their chi, now that they’re startin’ over and all of that. Didn’t Taiitsukun say something about their spirits being the same even if their bodies ain’t? That would explain it, right?”

“You didn’t sense anything at all?”

“No, but then why would I?” Tasuki shrugged. “You’re the one with the radar set on overdrive. Not me.”

“I know.” Chichiri frowned. “But it was so vivid. Like he was right there in front of me. And then… nothing.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about life forces and stuff like that. But I do know Nuriko is dead, so if it’s not because he’s been reborn, your senses must need re-tuning, or something.” Tasuki said bluntly. “You don’t always make the right call, you know — and sometimes your landings and hunches are way off base. Perhaps it’s just that.”

“Your faith in me is overwhelming, you know.” Chichiri said dryly. Tasuki snorted.

“Not that.” He said frankly. “But you know, couldn’t you have just imagined it?”

“No. It was too strong.” Chichiri shook his head. “It was Nuriko and it was almost like… a live signal. It wasn’t his spirit, but then… no, I *think* it was alive. At least..it’s hard to be sure.”

“There you go, then. He’s been reborn. Case closed.” Tasuki grinned. “Any other problems I can help you with while I’m on a roll?”

“Tasuki.” Chichiri sighed. “Look, even if they are being reborn, it wasn’t that kind of a feeling. To be reborn, Nuriko and the rest are letting go of their identities in this life. They’re changing and starting over. But this wasn’t that kind of fresh, new signal. In fact, it felt the opposite.”

“Old and stinky?” Tasuki looked nonplussed, and despite himself, Chichiri laughed.

“I should know better than to try and have a sensible conversation with you about anything.” He said resignedly. “But either way, I know what I felt. I’m thinking I should try and check it out — if I can work out where the signal came from.”

“I see.” Tasuki’s face became uncharacteristically serious. “So what you’re actually saying is that you’re gonna take off into the wilderness again. Right?”

“Yes, pretty much.” Chichiri admitted. “At least, I want to get to the bottom of this. There was something… odd about what I felt. I just want to put my mind at rest.”

“And you ain’t sensed any of the others around? Just Nuriko?”

“Just Nuriko. At least so far.” Chichiri confirmed. “But even so, I want to check it out.”

Tasuki was silent for a moment, glancing at the ground. Then he raised his bronzish eyes, a question in their wolfish depths.

“Do you think he’s in some kind of trouble?” He asked quietly. Chichiri started, then shrugged.

“I don’t know till I go see.” he admitted. “It was so strong a feeling, but then it went away again immediately and it’s going to be hard enough putting a lock on where it came from, anyway. But… there

was something strange about it. That's all I know."

Tasuki frowned.

"Nuriko's a Shichi Seishi. Like you an' me." He said slowly. "So if he's in trouble, we oughta check it out."

"We?" Chichiri looked startled. Tasuki grinned, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, it would give me some space from Anzu, and you know, I guess it's the right thing to do, in the circumstances." He said ruefully. "It's not like we'll be away from the mountain long, right? Not with your powers and everything. We'll go, find him, check it out and make sure all's okay, then we'll come back. Probably be done by nightfall. Right?"

"I suppose we might be." Chichiri agreed slowly. Then he nodded. "All right, then. We'll both go — but hadn't you better explain to Kouji where you're taking off to all of a sudden?"

"Sure. And we should eat, before we leave. I'm starving." Tasuki agreed. "Then we can set out and see what we can find. For a dead dude, Nuriko sure does cause us all some trouble."

"Yes." Chichiri said thoughtfully, his mind returning to the sudden, vivid impulse he had had up on the mountain. "I wonder if that's what he is, after all."

"Huh?" Tasuki looked blank.

"A dead person." Chichiri said vaguely.

"Chichiri, you're being weird again."

"Forget it." Chichiri shook his head. "As you say, we'll eat and then we'll go find out. After all, with Miaka back in her world, it surely can't be anything *too* major this time, you know?"

Random notes…

The farmer's boy in Hokkan was who you probably think it was….;) I wanted to write him in — I had a whole scene with him, actually — but at the moment it hasn't worked out for the story. So he got a brief moment of lip service instead here! (And if you don't know who I mean I'm not gonna tell ya!)

No idea why the heck this is a relation of Soi's, by the way. I wasn't going to even refer to her in this story at all. But by coincidence Furuete

Kudasai came up on my playlist as I was writing this, so she kind of got dragged into the thing. Haku Kaen is her real name, of course. Random… blah…;)

Oh yeah, the Ryuuen thing. I love Japanese! Nuriko's Ryuuen characters mean "graceful willow", and my little brat's mean "dragon fire". Same name, different kanji. I'm such a geek. Sigh

Wow, I'm hyper ***and*** *babblesome tonight. Not a good sign…*

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

"So now we're here, are you going to explain yourself to me?"

From within the central chamber of the big Yukigase house, the stranger raised uncertain eyes to the inquisitive, demanding ones of his cross-dressing companion, taking in the determined demeanour and folded arms of the man that stood before him with an amount of trepidation. Despite his attempts to be feminine, he was too broad and physically built to carry it off with any success, and in fact, looming over his visitor from above, he was more intimidating than delicate. Silence followed his question, and the man frowned, sinking down into a chair himself.

"Kourin, it *is* you, isn't it?" He said hesitantly, after the silence threatened to grow oppressive. "Turning up here, out of the blue — but… it is you? I'm sure it is. I'd know that face — those cheekbones, and that exotic, sexy mole on your cheek is one of a kind. But geez, what happened to you? Your pretty hair, where's it all gone? Don't tell me you had a change of heart — that you decided you were a man, after all the trouble I went to to pretty you up as a woman fit for the Emperor's eye?"

The stranger, now labelled Kourin, continued to stare at his companion blankly, and the bulky transvestite sighed.

"You really don't remember anything, do you?" He asked wearily, and slowly, "Kourin" shook his head.

"Well, thats gratitude for you." The man's lips pursed, pressing together the thick coating of colour as he considered the situation. "Right. Fine then. My name's Tamatama. This village is called Yukigase. And two — no, it might even be three years ago now, you stayed here for a while with a relative — an uncle, by the name of Sonjun — although he left Yukigase during the war and he never did come back to it. Any of this ringing any bells, yet?"

Kourin glanced at him, then shook his head again. Tamatama's thick brows drew together thoughtfully.

"Come to think of it, I was pretty sure you were dead." He said reflectively. "That was what we were told. I mean, not in so many words. Most of the people here didn't know you were *you*, as it were.

That was our secret, more or less. But I remember… it was over the border, in Hokkan. Not so far, really, from Yukigase. That's why we knew about it. A Suzaku warrior had been struck down by a demon, that's how they told it. A demon like Yukiyasha, coming for revenge for his kind."

"Yuki… yasha?" Kourin echoed uncertainly. "I'm sorry. I don't know what that is, or what you mean, Tamatama-san. I don't remember anything — have I really been to this village before?"

Tamatama groaned with frustration, getting to his feet and padding purposefully across the room to where his visitor sat. At his approach, Kourin shrank back warily, but Tamatama did not hesitate. Instead he grabbed the newcomer's tunic firmly in his meaty hands, pulling it open to reveal the man's chest. Kourin let out a yell of protest, struggling to free himself from the other man's grip, and as he pushed against his companion, the brawny transvestite went sprawling backwards, only narrowly missing hitting the door with some force. He picked himself up slowly and ruefully, taking in the bewildered, stricken expression in his visitor's eyes as he did so.

"Yes. You *are* Kourin." He said frankly. "No doubt about it."

"I… I don't understand." Kourin faltered, and Tamatama waved a finger at his companion's chest.

"Look at yourself." He instructed. "Doesn't that bring back any recollections at all, when you see *that* burning through your skin for all to see?"

Slowly Kourin lowered his gaze, a gasp escaping his lips as he registered the blazing red mark beneath his left collarbone. He clapped a hand over it, meeting Tamatama's eyes with frightened ones of his own.

"What does it mean?" He whispered. "The willow — that's the mark of the willow! When the boy outside… when he said his name, I immediately thought of the willow. But… why? What is this? What's happening and why can't I remember anything at all?"

"I don't know the answer to the last bit." Tamatama heaved his bulk back into his seat, his expression becoming more serious as he registered his friend's distress. "Quite obviously you're not dead, because you're here, and since you can throw me across the room with a bare touch, I'd say you're the real deal. About the amnesia — my best guess is that whatever supposedly killed you in Hokkan jus' scrambled your brains about a bit, that's why you don't know who you are. But as for the severed hair…"

He pursed his lips again, tut-tutting.

“It takes a long time to grow hair that beautiful and shiny.” He said regretfully. “It’s a crime, to think that I look at you now and see half of Kourin’s beauty stripped away from her.”

“I… thought I was a… man?” Kourin said doubtfully. “Aren’t I? I mean… *aren’t* I?”

“That’s something only you know the answer to, my boy.” Despite himself, Tamatama’s eyes danced at this seemingly absurd question. “Last time I saw you, you were calling yourself Kourin, dressing up as a lady of the Harem and you had your heart set on being all girl. Maybe things have changed — I don’t know. You don’t look like the same Kourin to me, that’s for sure. It breaks my heart to say it, but it’s true. And wearing such dowdy, unflattering clothes! Didn’t you tell me your father worked in the textile business in Eiyou? He’d be tearing his hair out to see you now, robed in such cheap wares! You’ve let yourself go and make no mistake — whatever happened to you in Hokkan, my friend, it obviously had a big impact on your sense of style.”

Kourin was silent for a moment, absorbing all of this.

“There was… a mountain.” He said haltingly. “And… that’s all. I don’t know anything else. Nothing. Just… whatever has happened since I woke up here and spoke to Haku-san’s children.”

“Dai is a good man.” Tamatama reflected. “Too kind for his own good, perhaps, but the sort of person Yukigase needed, after the wreckage the demon left behind her. But you probably don’t remember that at all either, do you?”

He winked.

“*You* were the Suzaku warrior who got rid of Yukiyasha once and for all.” He said softly. “That’s what that thing on your chest means, Kourin. It’s one of Suzaku’s signs. Nuriko. That’s who you really are. Nuriko of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. One of the southern stars of Kounan.”

“Suzaku Shichi…” Nuriko paused, his eyes widening slightly as he digested this information. Tamatama watched him like a hawk, as if expecting to see his friend suddenly put all the pieces together, but instead the man sighed, sinking back into his chair.

“I don’t really understand.” He admitted. “For a moment, I felt… something. Like a part of me was connected… somewhere. But to tell you the truth, I feel like I’m in limbo. Like I’m not really here… and I

don't know where I *should* be."

"You obviously got a good whack to the head at some point, I'd wager." Tamatama said decidedly. "Still, you're here, and for now, that'll do. You'll stay with us, of course? Dai's family are kind, like I said, but they probably can't take another mouth to feed. And you and I, I consider us friends. Even if you can't remember our prior acquaintance."

"I *don't* remember." Nuriko acknowledged. "But… but if you don't mind, I think I'd like to do that. You seem to be a kind person, too. And… obviously there are a lot of things I need to know about myself, if I'm going to make sense of all or any of this. Right now it sounds like you know me pretty well, and that I trusted you, in the past. So if you can help me… I'd like that."

"Yes." Tamatama agreed slowly. "And there are a lot of things. Starting with your name, and working up."

"You said my name was Nuriko. Because of this thing, here, on my chest." Nuriko's fingers went to his breast again, now covered loosely once more by the fabric of his tunic, and Tamatama nodded.

"Yes, that's true." He agreed. "And when you were here, visiting, you always called yourself Kourin. Chou Kourin — that was the name you used."

"But Kourin is… a girl's name?"

"It is. And it depends on whether or not you are a girl, still, Kourin. Or whether being Nuriko means you're not true to that path any more." Tamatama said gravely. Nuriko's eyes became clouded, and he sighed.

"I don't know." He admitted. "Part of me thinks… yes. Part of me… no. I don't get it, but I don't know for sure the answer to that question. I… maybe… I think I… I'm like you, aren't I? I like to… wear girl's clothes, even though I'm not… not really a girl?"

"Yes." Tamatama grinned. "See, you are beginning to remember! And in which case, Kourin rolls more easily off the tongue when I'm looking at your pretty face, even if you haven't got all that silky hair to play with any more. You still are more girl than boy, I think — at least, I'd wager a good part of my life on it, even if you are wearing that Godawful piece of rag."

"So then, my name is Kourin. Right?"

"Actually, your name is Ryuuen." Tamatama admitted, and Nuriko

started, staring up at him in disbelief.

“Like..?”

“Like Dai’s son. Yes.” Tamatama nodded. “Because of the willow. That’s what you told me, last time we met. That your parents named you Ryuuen, because of the red willow on your chest.”

“The willow.” Nuriko’s fingers tightened around the fabric of his tunic, and he sighed. “I see. Now it makes sense. But when I saw the boy — him and his sister — it was like someone had stabbed me deep inside, Like something terrible was trying to get out of me — I can’t even begin to explain what that means.”

“Ryuuen and Miya are close kids. They play together a lot, and that’s probably why.” Tamatama said wisely. “Ryuuen is always protecting Miya, that’s the truth of it. And you told me — before you came here — that you’d once had a sister you’d protected, too. Maybe even though you’ve lost your memories, you could still feel her inside of you. That’s where you told me she was, anyway. She was Kourin. That’s why you chose that name to live under.”

“Kourin.” Nuriko murmured the name again. Slowly he nodded.

“Perhaps.” He agreed wearily. “It’s all too muddling — too much to take in.”

“Well, let’s get you some food and find you a place to sleep.” Tamatama suggested. “Father is more than willing for you to stay, being that we’re friends, and all that. And you can remain here as long as you need, you know. No time limit on your recovery. I know I’ll bring your true, cheeky self out of you given a little effort and concentration, so don’t you worry about a thing. Everything will be fine.”

“Fine, huh?” Nuriko murmured, and even as he spoke the words, he was sure he felt a dark hand clench around his heart for the briefest of moments, catching his breath and making him swallow hard.

“Kourin? Are you all right?” Tamatama looked concerned at his friend’s sudden pallor and Nuriko gathered himself, nodding.

“I think so.” He admitted. “Just for a moment I felt… not here. That’s all. Like I was plunged into something else.”

“You really are messed up.” Tamatama tut-tutted. “Still, I’m sure some Tama TLC will put you to rights. Come with me, my friend. Let’s see if we can’t at least do something about your outfit!”

“So, where exactly are we heading for this time, then?”

As Tasuki and Chichiri reached the foot of the mountain path, Tasuki cast his companion a quizzical glance. “I thought we were gonna go hat-hopping across the country to wherever it was you felt Nuriko’s chi — isn’t that what we’re doing? Why are we walking, dammit — don’t tell me you broke that thing!”

“No, it’s fine. I just..am not sure where Nuriko is.” Chichiri owned, frowning as he reached up to remove his mask, rubbing his brow pensively. “I’ve been concentrating for a while now, and I was sure I’d pick it up again. But no matter how hard I try, it doesn’t seem to be anywhere. I’ve reached out as far as I can across Kounan… but it’s like he’s vanished. I don’t like how it feels… but I can’t get a fix on where he is.”

“So, basically, we might as well give up now?” Tasuki put his hands on his hips, eying the monk in exasperation. “Great.”

“Hey, you were the one who chose to come, you know.” Chichiri was unmoved. “Space from Anzu, wasn’t it? Something like that?”

He grinned, shrugging his shoulders.

“I guess even wolves go into hiding when there’s a woman on the loose.” He added ruefully, and despite himself, Tasuki flushed with indignation.

“Shut your face already, will you?” He demanded. “Anzu might have invited herself up the mountain, but I wish you and Kouji’d both stop with the innuendo. I don’t care what she does or where she goes, all right? Sure, we were friends, but she overstepped the bounds of that when she decided to set up home on Reikaku-zan and stalk me around my own territory! All she’s done so far is remind me that she’s a girl, and she just makes me think of my family down there, in the village.”

He jerked his foot in the direction of a small settlement, nestled beyond the trees. “Which is not something I need on a daily basis. Why do you think I came to Reikaku-zan in the first place?”

“Then it doesn’t matter, does it, if we take a wander away from the peak?” Chichiri asked lightly, and Tasuki frowned.

“Guess not.” He admitted. “All right. But if you can’t find him, what are we meant to do? Can’t you remember anything about it, when you felt his life force? Anything about the direction or anything else?”

“It was… strange, you know?” Chichiri frowned, rubbing his

temples. “Doing this is starting to give me a headache, too. I’m stretching this as far as I can reach, but it’s no good. For that instant, he was right here with me. Like he was where you’re standing now. And then? Gone.”

“Maybe he’s hauntin’ you, Chichiri.” Tasuki laughed, raising his hands as he pulled a grotesque face in his friend’s direction. “One last fling before he gets his new body. What do you think?”

“I think you oughta be careful your face doesn’t stay like that.” Chichiri shrugged his shoulders. He frowned, taking his *kasa* and glancing at it pensively. Then he nodded, making up his mind.

“I think the best idea would be to go to Taikyoku-zan, and ask Taiitsukun.” He reflected. “Since Miaka went back, I’ve felt like there’s no reason to go back there, not really, so I haven’t tried to reach out my magic in that direction. But if this involves a Seishi, it might be that they can help. With that mirror of hers, maybe Taiitsukun knows where Nuriko is. That’d save us some time searching, and we might even discover why it was I felt his chi so strongly.”

“So we are going into the hat, after all?” Tasuki asked. Chichiri nodded.

“Sure, if you want to come with me.” He agreed, twirling it pensively between his fingers. “It seems like the simplest course of action to take.”

“You promise me you’re not going to drop me into a stream or land us up a tree or something by mistake, if I get into that thing?” Tasuki took a step closer, then hesitated, eying it warily. “I’m a mountain bandit, not a bird or a fish… and I know you and your landings.”

“For a mountain Kashira, Tasuki, you can sure be a baby sometimes.” Chichiri said crushingly. “Stay here, if you like. I can always go alone, you know?”

“Hey, I’m not a coward!” Tasuki reacted to this indignantly, appearing ever more the wolf as anger sparked in his bronze eyes. “I said I was coming, didn’t I? So why are we wasting time — let’s go already!”

“Fine.” Chichiri grinned, tossing his hat in the air as he brought his fingers together, focusing his energy on Taikyoku-zan.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a blazing red light flared out of the hat, the force and suddenness of its flare knocking both men violently backwards. Tasuki stumbled, tripping over his own feet as he almost toppled off the rocky path completely, and Chichiri, who had

gathered his wits a little more quickly, brought his hands together as he closed his eyes, muttering an incantation. There was another explosion of reddish light, then the hat fell like a rock to the ground, landing heavily against a boulder. Chichiri raised his finger to his cheek, feeling the cool wetness of fresh blood and he grimaced, wiping it away as he got to his feet.

“Tasuki?” He called. “Are you all right?”

“What the hell did you do?!” His friend emerged from the dent in the earth into which he had fallen, his clothes and hair thick with dust and leaf litter, and despite the situation, Chichiri found it difficult not to smile. “Chichiri, what the hell was that meant to be?!”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” The monk replied, retrieving his hat as he ran his fingers carefully over it, looking for any sign of damage. “But what it felt like… was that something was blocking our way.”

“You think so, huh?” Tasuki retorted. “Then tell me this. Why did *you* end up more or less on your feet, while I wound up in a ditch, huh?”

“You need quicker reactions.” Chichiri said calmly. “That’s all. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“No.” Tasuki shook his head, running his fingers through his wild mane of hair as he rid it of stray leaves and twigs. “But that’s not the point.”

He frowned, eying his friend more carefully.

“You are, though. Now I look at you… your face is bleeding.”

“I had to throw up a barrier of my own to counteract whatever it was that came out of the hat. It took me a little by surprise, that’s all.” Chichiri shrugged. “Just a scratch, nothing else — a stray stone that hit me before I had time to react.”

He grinned.

“My face has enough scars on it already. Noone will notice if I get another one.” He added evenly.

“But what the hell *was* that thing?” Tasuki gazed at the scorch mark in the ground, biting his lip as he moved towards it, kicking it hesitantly with his foot. “I mean, look at that. Are you saying that, if you hadn’t made a barrier, we’d have been frittered worse than if I hit us with the tessen full blast? Is that what you’re hinting at?”

“Maybe.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “But it didn’t happen, so it’s not

worth dwelling on it. More important is why it happened and why we couldn't get to Taikyoku-zan. Contrary to your belief in my transport skills, that's one place I never have any problem travelling. I spent three years there, training, remember? It's like home from home for me. But the door was firmly locked this time."

"Seishi keep out." Tasuki murmured, bending to rub the black ash between his fingers. "That's some security system. Do you think it's because Miaka's gone home? Can we not go there any more, because we're not Suzaku's warriors now or something?"

Chichiri came to stand beside him, spreading his hands out over the warm ground as he did so.

"We're still Suzaku's Seishi, Tasuki." He said quietly. "If we weren't…"

He paused, then reached out his left hand to grab his friend's right wrist, pushing back the sleeve of the bandit's heavy jacket. The character for 'wings' glittered brightly in the sunshine, and Tasuki frowned, understanding the implication in his friend's words.

"If we weren't, that'd have gone." He reflected. "But it ain't gone. So we're still Seishi. And yet we can't get to that stupid sand witch's mound of earth when we need her advice. More, she tried to fritter us? What's that about? Give me your hat, Chichiri, and focus on the place again. I'll send her some fire of my own to tell her what I think of her barricade!"

"Don't be stupid." Chichiri admonished. "We were lucky that time, you know? It could have hurt us. I'm not going to try it again — it's enough of a miracle my *kasa* wasn't charred to cinders, as well as either of us!"

"So what, then? What do we do now?" Tasuki demanded. "How are we meant to find Nuriko — if it *was* even Nuriko — and what's going on on that stupid mountain?"

Chichiri was silent for a moment, biting his lip.

"I can't find Taiitsukun's chi, either." He admitted. "I haven't tried, since she sent us back to Kounan… but now I am, and it's just not there. Nyan Nyan's either. Something's happened on Taikyoku-zan, that's beyond doubt… I don't like how this looks or how it feels, Tasuki. It's… sort of creepy, you know?"

"Yeah… I guess it is." Tasuki looked uncharacteristically sombre. "Do you think the old bag bought it, then?"

“Taiitsukun is the Emperor of the Heavens, Tasuki. I’m not sure that she can die quite so easily as that.” Chichiri shook his head.

“Some Emperor.” Tasuki snorted. “How do you explain the light in the hat, then? Was that Suzaku? It was red light, right?”

“It was.” Chichiri admitted. “But it didn’t… feel like Suzaku. It was more like… blood. Like… something was bleeding. Somewhere.”

“Maybe it’s not a good idea for you to spend so long climbin’ mountains. You’re starting to sound delusional and creepy yourself.” Tasuki objected. “What do you mean, bleeding? That wasn’t blood, it was light. Damn hot light, but light. Fire, maybe. But it wasn’t blood.”

“I know. Maybe I meant it metaphorically.” Chichiri frowned. “But for an instant it seemed like the world was bleeding. That somehow, whatever I tapped into…”

He faltered, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“I’m sorry. I’m making no sense.” He said, and there was frustration in his tones. “I wish I was.”

“Well, so we can’t get to Taikyoku-zan. Does that mean that something is going on, or can we just quietly ignore it and walk away?” Tasuki asked softly, and Chichiri realised that his friend’s fingers had closed around the cold metal of the tessen, as if ready to repel a second attack. He opened his mouth to answer, then faltered, his eyes widening as a suffocating sensation washed over his entire body. He stumbled, and Tasuki let out an exclamation, grabbing him by the arm and hauling him roughly back to his feet.

“Are you okay?” The bandit’s tones were laced with genuine concern, and Chichiri gathered his wits, nodding his head.

“Yes. I’m all right.” He agreed. “It just took me off guard. That’s all. Such a potent feeling… it hit a little too hard.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“Nuriko.” Chichiri’s brows drew together. “And now I’m sure of it. Sure that something… something’s terribly wrong with all of this. Taikyoku-zan, Taiitsukun, and Nuriko’s chi. All of it — is connected. And I think… I think we have to do something about it, Tasuki. If we can even work out what that something is. Because for a moment there I had the sensation that this was the beginning of the end of everything — unless we can find a way to stall it.”

“End of everything?” Tasuki stared. “Of Suzaku’s Shichi Seishi? Of Kounan? Of what?”

“Of everything in this world.” Chichiri said grimly. “Beginning with the rebirth of our friends, and spreading down to everything we see before us right now. I can’t pitch Nuriko’s location, but I did feel deep-rooted fear and anguish, when I picked up on his life signs. Something went wrong — and I’m afraid… we need to find him. I know he’s up north — towards the border with Hokkan. That’s all I know. But I think we should go there. As soon as we possibly can.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Tasuki tapped the hat with the handle end of the tessen, raising an eyebrow. “Let’s go.”

“The hat and I, we’re spent for the day.” Chichiri admitted. “I used a lot of my strength warding off that light, Tasuki, and the *kasa*’s suffered worse than I have. Right now I can’t connect a spell to it, it just won’t respond.”

“*Gr..e… e… at.*” Tasuki groaned. “Then what? We’re *walking* all the way to Hokkan?”

“Not all the way to Hokkan.” Chichiri shook his head. “But we should head to that city not far from here — what’s it called again, Souun? And see if we can hire horses. By nightfall, my power might have restored itself and we can move more quickly. But I think we shouldn’t hang around here and wait, whatever happens. We need to find Nuriko and put things to rights — before he crosses the line Hikou did and turns into some kind of tormented demon soul!”

Once they were gone, a shaken figure emerged from her hiding place in the bushes, from where she had seen and heard everything that had passed between the two Seishi. She hesitated, brushing down her own clothing to rid it of the traces of the thick bushes amongst which she had concealed herself. Biting her lip, she moved across to the scorched patch of grass, bending to touch it with shaking fingers.

“Is this the work of a demon?” She whispered. “I heard Chichiri say it — something about a demon, and about needing to leave right away. Genrou — you’re just here and you’re off again — disappearing into the dust and I might not see you again. If this is truly that dangerous… what if you don’t come back to Reikaku-zan this time? What if…?”

She frowned, then clenched her fists, making up her mind.

“I’m a bandit now, and I’m loyal to the Kashira, no matter what.” She said resolutely. “And I’ll keep my promise to Reirei, too. Genrou and Chichiri are the only Suzaku warriors left, now, and they may

need help. I'll show Genrou that I'm more than just another girl washed up on the mountainside! I'll go with them to Souun — and somehow, I'll find a way to help them!"

Characters from the "Gaiden" novels…

Tamatama: A somewhat brawny transvestite (transsexual?) in Yukigase who befriended "Kourin" when she stayed in Yukigase and taught him tricks of the trade to conceal his true gender from prying eyes. (Yukiyasha Den)

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

Everything was black.

Nuriko opened his eyes, blinking against the darkness as he struggled to gain his bearings. Fleeting pictures flitted through his mind of faces and locations that should have drawn forth memories, but instead they seemed like a cascade of useless confetti, littering the floor of his mind and making it difficult for him to see his way. He stumbled forwards, fighting against unseen hands that seemed to grip him tightly around the wrists and the ankles, pulling him back. In the distance, there was the scream of a young girl, and he saw a silhouette suddenly marked out before him in a haze of whiteish light. A monster, something blue glittering on his lower back held the shadow of a young girl in his claws, and Nuriko opened his mouth to yell out, tearing himself free of the tendrils that sought to restrain him. As soon as he had managed to free himself, however, the scene was gone, and instead a slick, spattered trail of red liquid led the way up a mountain path towards a cave, shrouded in darkness.

As Nuriko pushed forward, half afraid of what he'd find inside, he was overwhelmed by the sense of death, and as his eyes became accustomed to the blackness, he saw the figure of the young girl once more, realising that she was the source of the blood. A jagged spike from the frozen cave roof pierced her young form, and as he stumbled towards her, he was aware of her flexing out her hand towards him in a spasmodic, juddering movement.

"Byakuren." The word flickered through his mind, passing his lips before he even realised what he had said. The next minute he was screaming it at the top of his voice, as the whole world seemed to explode into darkness once more.

"Kourin!"

At the sound of his name, Nuriko's eyes snapped open, at first disorientated and confused. Strong arms held him down, but he pushed them away, sitting up as he drew heavy, frightened breaths of air into his body. Every nerve tingled and ached with the memory of his dream, and tears ran unchecked down his cheeks as he struggled to get to grips with his composure.

"Byakuren." He whispered, and at the sound of his voice, the figure at his bedside put a gentle hand on his arm.

“You were asleep. Dreaming.” A voice said softly, and Nuriko glanced around him wildly, struggling to place it in the darkened room. As the large figure moved to pull back the heavy drapes that cloaked the daylight from entering the chamber, recollection returned to him slowly and he buried his head in his hands, realising that he was shaking with the force of what he had dreamed. Sweat still coursed his brow, drenching his body in fresh, cold panic and he drew another shuddering breath of air, raising terrified eyes to the other man.

“Tamatama.” He murmured, and the transvestite nodded his head.

“You were dreaming.” He repeated. “I thought it was probably a bad one, when I heard you scream Byakuren’s name… so I decided it would be better to wake you. You put up quite a fight, though — that was the other thing. I thought I should do something about it, before you ripped the whole house to shreds. Father is quite understanding, on the whole — but I don’t think he’d take it so well if the house was ripped to shreds while he’s attending something in the village.”

“A fight?” Nuriko blinked, registering for the first time the devastation of the chamber in which he lay. A desk and some other wooden furniture implement — splintered and no longer recogniseable — lay across the floor, papers and ink scattered over the patterned rugs that covered the cold stone. Even the bed on which he lay had not escaped the force of his panicked struggles and as his eyes widened in horror, he registered a fresh bruise across the transvestite’s left cheek.

At his stricken gaze, Tamatama touched his face ruefully, nodding his head.

“You really aren’t as much of a lady as you used to be, that’s for sure. Hitting a girl like that.” He said lightly, although there was a seriousness in his eyes that made Nuriko feel ashamed. He frowned, dropping his gaze as he drew his knees up to his chest, hugging them tightly.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. “What did I..what did I do?”

“I think that you were sleep walking. Or sleep-something. Reliving a memory.” Tamatama said pensively. “Or maybe several memories, I don’t know. You were taking a nap — you looked all in. Next thing I know the maid is shrieking that there’s a monster roaming the house and I’m having to use every inch of my strength just to keep you in this one room. You weren’t easy to wake up, Kourin — it must’ve been some nightmare, that’s all I can say about it.”

“I… hurt someone?” Nuriko looked worried, but Tamatama shook his head.

“No. Just me, and I can take it. Coming from you, anyway.” He replied, sinking his impressive bulk down onto the end of the bed and causing it to creak as he did so. “But the house mightn’t have got off so lightly, if I hadn’t intervened. This room, well, we can probably do something about that. But you were all for raging through the hallways, too, and I didn’t think that was a good idea. I think you were chasing something, or running after something. When you said Byakuren’s name… I realised what it was.”

“Byakuren.” Nuriko repeated the girl’s name and a sudden stab of coldness shot through him, causing him to flinch, closing his eyes. Tamatama sighed.

“You came to Yukigase, and I suppose that’s why.” He said slowly. “Because of Byakuren. You always did want to take everything into your own hands, Kourin. But for you to remember that, of all things…”

“Who is Byakuren?” Nuriko’s head snapped up, an urgent look in his eyes. “Tell me, please. I need to know — who is Byakuren!? What happened to her?”

“She was a girl in this village. You met when you stayed here, and you were friends — of a sort.” Tamatama pursed his unevenly lined lips. “She was a pretty child, and she and her elder brother lived here with their mother for a while. They were from Eiyou too, originally — I guess you felt a connection.”

“What *happened* to her, Tamatama?” Images of Nuriko’s dream washed over him again and he swallowed, feeling giddy and sick. “I need to know that. *What happened to Byakuren*?”

“She died, up on the mountain, in the cave where the demon was supposed to hunt.” Tamatama admitted. “You went there, as I told you, and you fought the demon. You were the one who saved Yukigase from its grip. But Byakuren — she was worried about you. She insisted on following you up the mountain — she didn’t want you to be hurt. I don’t know… exactly what happened after that. But she… she didn’t make it back down again, and I know you… were quite upset.”

“I knew it.” Nuriko clenched his fists, and for an instant Tamatama could see the edges of the willow symbol glowing brightly against his friend’s pale skin. “She died because of me. Because I didn’t save her. That’s what I dreamed about.”

He got to his feet, pushing back the blankets as he moved to the window, gazing down at the village below.

“I let her die.”

“No, you didn’t.” Tamatama shook his head, but Nuriko wheeled on him, anger in his eyes.

“Don’t tell me my own memories, when you weren’t even there!” He exclaimed. “Don’t presume to tell me what happened in my life! You can’t rewrite my history leaving out the bad bits, you know. I remember what I dreamed — I *know* what happened to Byakuren. She died… in that cave… because *I didn’t protect her*!”

With that he pushed past his companion, hurrying down the steps of the house and out into the frozen landscape. Tamatama’s voice called his name but Nuriko paid no attention, grief swirling through his heart as he pieced together the pictures of his dream.

“Byakuren.” He whispered. “Is this why I came to Yukigase? Because of you? Because I let you die… is this some kind of retribution, then? Am I here… to be punished?”

“So we’re just gonna head north an’ hope for the best?”

As Tasuki and Chichiri rode away from the mountain city of Souun, Tasuki cast his monkish companion a quizzical glance, noticing that the tension had not gone from his companion’s demeanour. “It’s already gettin’ dark, an’ it took us long enough to find horses. Aren’t your powers back up an’ running yet? It would still be quicker to hat-hop, if you have an idea where we’re going.”

“I haven’t really. Just the northern border.” Chichiri said grimly, shaking his head. “And as for my powers, I think they’re better than they were. I’m not sure about my *kasa*, though — I still can’t connect a spell to it, or transport us anywhere. If I had been able to, that’s what we’d have done when we realised the city was so busy — I didn’t know that it was a local festival coming up or that so many people would be needing horses.”

He sent his companion an accusing look.

“You could’ve told me that.”

“Didn’t think about it.” Tasuki admitted. “We’ve been away for a while, ain’t we? I’d forgotten. I don’t spend all my time hanging round Souun, you know.”

He looked furtive.

“Too close to home.” He added. ‘Too many people know my family there. I’m still “Kou-san’s Shun’u’, and someone wants to share some new anecdote or borin’ story with me about something… it’s not my favourite haunt.”

“Your village is near to Souun, isn’t it?” Chichiri asked. Tasuki shrugged, nodding his head.

“Yeah. Across the mountain somewhat, but yes.” He agreed. “People take trade from the village to sell at market in Souun on a good day. That’s how people know who I am. Aidou or one of my other sisters would always drag me out by the ear to help them… as if I gave a damn about farm produce or anythin’ like that. But then again, if I stopped at home, it was laundry or wood-choppin’ or some other such thing.”

“So, in effect, you were just lazy.” Chichiri reflected. “And you ran away from home because of it.”

“Shut your face.” Tasuki snapped. “If you’d grown up with my sisters, you’d know why the hell I hate women so much, believe me! And this ain’t finding Nuriko — so why are you babblin’ on about my family and my village anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri looked surprised. “Sorry. I guess I got waylaid.”

“Well, get un-waylaid, and start focusing your senses on finding Nuriko’s chi again, okay? So at least we gallop in the right direction.” Tasuki instructed.

“It really is getting dark now.” Chichiri glanced upwards at the sky, sighing as he slowly shook his head. “Maybe we should have waited till morning to leave after all — but I feel better that we’re moving. That something’s happening and we don’t have time to waste sitting around doing nothing.”

“Well, impulsive and proactive is a new attitude for you, but I can work with it.” Tasuki said frankly, offering his companion a wolfish smile. “At least it’s action and it’s away from Anzu. If we’re away a day or two, it suits me. By the time I get back, she might have got bored an’ taken off someplace else.”

“Perhaps you could introduce her to your family.” Chichiri murmured absently. “Since by your account they’d probably get on famously.”

“Chichiri!” Tasuki glared at his friend, and Chichiri shrugged.

“Just an observation.” He said carelessly. “I think you underestimate that girl, you know. She came a long way to see you — and you should be nicer to her. She’s brave, considering that she just lost someone she loved a lot. You’ve never been in that position, so you probably don’t realise it — but it isn’t easy to smile and laugh in the way she does, so soon after someone close dies.”

“What do you mean, I haven’t?” Tasuki demanded indignantly. “What about Nuriko! Chiriko! Mitsukake! Hotohori-sama! Who are they, if not people I was close to, huh? Don’t give me that shit — of course I get it!”

“I don’t think you do.” Chichiri shook his head, glancing absently up at the sky over their head. “No matter who we’ve lost, Tasuki, we’ve always had the rest of the team to turn to. And until recently, the others have still been with us, albeit in spirit form. For Anzu, her sister has passed on. Crossed the divide. They won’t see one another again, probably not ever. And she had to deal with that all alone, coming all the way from the Western lands to Kounan in the way she did. You’ve never been alone with grief. That’s what I’m saying. And Anzu’s a lot stronger than you give her credit for. That’s all.”

“So go marry her, then.” Tasuki muttered churlishly, and Chichiri tut-tutted, opening his mouth to reproach his friend’s sullen attitude. Something in the heavens caught his eye, however, and he hesitated, reining in his horse suddenly and causing it to kick out in protest, nearly causing him to tumble from it’s back.

“Chichiri, will you warn me before you hit the brakes?” With a struggle, Tasuki brought his own steed to a halt, casting his companion a look of annoyance. “What gives now? Another feeling? Because you’re really starting to piss me off with this, you know.”

“No.” Chichiri shook his head, raising his hand to point up at the sky. “Just look. Up there. Do you see what I see?”

“I see sky. I see stars. I see the moon. What am I looking for?” Tasuki’s expression became non-plussed, as he obediently squinted up at the darkening sky. “Give me a clue, at least. What *am* I looking at?”

“The stars.” Chichiri frowned. “Just look at them carefully, Tasuki. Of all people, you should be able to see what I mean.”

“Chichiri, they’re stars.” Tasuki said, frustrated. “They’re little and sparkly and they sit in the sky all the time. What’s so special about them this time?”

“Who are you, you great dummy?” Chichiri snapped, and Tasuki stared, startled by the unfamiliar sharpness in his companion’s voice.

“Tasuki.” He said now, glancing briefly at his arm as the character glittered and glowed against his skin. “And before you say it, yes, I know that it’s a constellation. That I’m a Seishi — a Celestial Warrior. That my identity is tied up with the stars — I know that. But what I don’t know is why that’s important right now.”

“So look at the stars carefully.” Chichiri instructed. “You know what the constellations of Suzaku look like, don’t you? At least, if you don’t, you’re more stupid than I thought.”

“Stop chewing me out, I’m looking already!” Tasuki complained. “Yes, I see them. That one’s mine, there, with all those sparklies all over the place. Guess it figures that a bandit has the most diamonds in the sky, huh?”

“And the others? What about them?” Chichiri pressed.

“What about them?” Tasuki looked blank. “There’s yours, there. Chichiri. Nuriko. Chiriko. Mitsukake’s is that one, and that’s the sea serpent, which is Hotohori. What about it?”

“Think about what you just said.” Chichiri said softly. “Think about it carefully.”

“What I said?” Tasuki was getting impatient now. “Will you just tell me already? You’re not saving any time or making any friends with this routine, you know!”

Chichiri sighed, shaking his head slowly.

“Chichiri. Nuriko. Hotohori. Chiriko. Tasuki. Mitsukake.” He said quietly. “That’s what you said. Right?”

“Right.” Tasuki agreed. “But I don’t… hey, wait a minute!”

“Yes?”

“Where the hell is *Tamahome’s* constellation?”

“Now we get there.” Chichiri buried his head in his hands. “How did you get to be kashira again, Tasuki? Did you just hit people over the head a lot until they agreed to vote you in?”

“Well, if you’d been a bit clearer in your meaning, I’d have got it sooner.” Tasuki returned. “But shit… where *are* Tama’s stars, anyway? There’s no cloud tonight, right? So… stars don’t move. Do they?”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri admitted, a frown touching his lips. “To be

honest… I don't like it any more than the other things I've been feeling. Taikyoku-zan. That red light. Nuriko's chi. All those things. And now Tamahome's constellation is missing from the sky over Kounan."

"Because Tama went to Miaka's world, do you think?" Tasuki breathed. Chichiri shrugged.

"I wonder." He agreed. "Although… something like that… shouldn't be able to move the heavens, should it?"

"You're asking the wrong bandit." Tasuki said soberly. "Tamahome really isn't here any more, though, is he? I mean, it could just be a trick of the sky, but… he ain't a part of this world now… is he? He's really gone. More so than the others. He's totally gone."

"Yes." Chichiri's voice held a pensive, thoughtful note. "Sou Kishuku doesn't exist any more, you know. Only Sukunami Taka exists now."

He frowned, as suddenly something assailed his senses, and he let out a gasp, gripping the reins of his horse more tightly as he did so.

"Chichiri?" Tasuki was alert in a moment. "Nuriko…?"

"No. Not this time." Chichiri shook his head, alarm flickering in his good eye. "We have to go back. Back to Souun — back to the mountain. We have to go back there… right now!"

"Chichi…" Tasuki stared at his companion as if he had lost his mind. "We've just got this far — you want to go back?"

"We have to. We have to… we might already be too late." Was Chichiri's cryptic response, as he wheeled his protesting horse around, spurring it on as he set off at a gallop back towards the distantly twinkling mountain town. Tasuki muttered a curse, but followed suit, the hooves pounding back against the soil as he struggled to keep pace with his companion's fleeter steed. As if real wolves were on his tail, Chichiri urged his beast to go faster, hastening into the city square and causing a few night revellers to dart hurriedly out of the way, one man cursing and waving his fist as the charging animal spattered mud and dust up against his clothing. Chichiri took no notice, however, and to Tasuki's disbelief, it seemed that the monk was set on riding at breakneck speed through the very centre of the still busy city.

"Chichiri, what the hell's going on!" He exclaimed, forcing his own horse on as he tried not to lose sight of his friend. "Where are you going? What's wrong!"

“Genrou! Chichiri!” A voice from the crowd at last made Chichiri falter, slowing his exhausted mare as he scanned the crowd for a sign of the speaker. Anzu stepped out of the melee, confusion on her face as she gazed up at the monk’s troubled, frightened expression.

“Chichiri? What’s wrong?” She murmured, and Chichiri could see the trail of reins between her own fingers. Relief flooded through his heart.

“You were going to follow us, weren’t you?” He demanded. Anzu nodded, alarm in her own eyes.

“I thought you might need help. What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”

“Go to Reikaku. Go get Kouji and some of the other bandits. Get them and bring them, quickly.” Chichiri said urgently. “Tasuki and I will go on ahead, but it may already be too late… it may already be…”

“Finally, I caught up to you!” Tasuki stalled his horse alongside the monk’s, casting Anzu a look of surprise. “You again? What are you doing in Souun?”

“She’s going to get Kouji.” Chichiri said softly. “And we… we haven’t time to give these horses second wind. We have to keep going, Tasuki. Through the town. Through the mountain path. We need to get… get to the village. We need to go there… right now. Damn my powers… we need to get there quickly!”

“The village?” Tasuki’s eyes widened. “Wait… *my* village? My damn village?”

Chichiri nodded his head, and Anzu’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Something’s happened?” She whispered.

“Just go get Kouji. Tell them that Genrou’s village is in trouble, and to bring men there. Tell him that’s what Genrou wants him to do.” Chichiri said swiftly, even as Tasuki’s expression underwent a transformation of it’s own.

“Hey, wait a minute.” He protested. “Stop giving orders in my name and tell me what’s going on. Tell me, Chichiri… what’s happening in my village?”

“Anzu, go. Go now.” Chichiri urged her, and Anzu, who had hesitated at the genuine worry in the kashira’s voice nodded, mounting her horse and turning it in the direction of the mountain and the Reikaku-zan bandits. Tasuki sent Chichiri a demanding look,

but before he could say anything, a figure stumbled into the centre of the town, gasping for air as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Fire in the eastern village!” He managed to get out. “A demon… fire… laid waste… the whole village is ablaze! If we’re not careful, the whole mountain could set alight!”

Characters from the “Gaiden” novels…

Byakuren - a young girl who "Kourin" once competed with for entrance to the Harem. Saved by the Emperor when both were younger, Byakuren just wants to get to the capital to remind him and thank him. However, she was killed by a demon haunting the village of Yukigase, where she and her family lived. It is to carry out her final wishes that Nuriko first entered the Imperial harem and became acquainted with the Emperor at all. Fell in love with Nuriko both before and after discovering his true gender and died in his defence. To Nuriko, another sister figure whose life and dreams he was also determined to take on and live alongside his and Kourin's own. (Yukiyasha Den)

Random Notes…

*I **know** someone’s gonna be wondering why Nuriko is focused on Byakuren and not Kourin at the moment! To save the wtf reviews — I have it all worked out in my head so it will make sense. It will, I promise! I have another idea in mind for Kourin.*

I think that’s all the Gaiden characters introduced for now… I think. Tamatama wasn’t going to have an involved role in this at all… aside from Anzu, I didn’t want to overly involve characters from the novels if I could help it (they’re really there for background/expansion purposes, to keep within canon rather than using OCs). But he amuses me too much, even when he’s being serious. Sort of a carbon copy of Mitsukake in drag (And I do so love Mitsukake! Everyone should love Mitsukake — he’s lovely!!)

Ahem. Babbling again. Sorry about that…

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

"Well, I guess it's all on me again, isn't it."

In his chamber at the top of Reikaku-zan, Kouji leant his elbows on the stone ledge of the window, gazing ruefully down at the landscape below. "The fate of a Seishi's second — dammit, when Hakurou made me promise to be Genrou's number two, I didn't imagine it'd mean deputisin' and running the damn gang for him as often as this. Makes you wonder, doesn't it — what it's actually like when Genrou's actually here taking charge!"

He smirked, his memory flitting back to the moment when Hakurou had officially handed over the succession of the bandit gang, in the time before he had known his ill health would eventually consume his soul.

"I wonder what the boss would've made of it all, had he been here to see it." He reflected. "Knowin' that Genrou's loyalties might be stretched one day, and yet still giving him the tessen to wield over Reikaku and everything that this mountain stands for. Sometimes even *I* wonder if he's more Genrou or Tasuki, these days. Still, I guess, it's my own fault, ain't it? I was the one who told Genrou to go after the Miko in the first place — I should just live with it."

He turned away from the window, sinking down onto his bed.

"Doin' anything else would be insanity." He acknowledged wryly. "Much as I get left holdin' the can, I wouldn't ever question Genrou's right to rule this roost. Of all of the Reikaku-zan bandits, he's the only one who can hold the tessen even at all like Hakurou-sama did. But yeesh, I wish he'd do a bit more of his own dirty work from time to time! I'd like to know that the kashira is still the kashira, at the end of the day, and not just a lackey of Suzaku that the God can call on whenever he feels like it!"

"Aniki?"

A pounding at the door startled him from his reverie and he frowned, getting to his feet as he wrenched the catch back, yanking the wooden divide back to meet the gaze of one of the junior members of the gang.

“Aniki, the girl wants to see you.” The boy said breathlessly, gazing up at his elder with a mixture of awe and urgency. “She said it was important. An emergency. She said that she had a message from the kashira… she needs to see you right away.”

“Anzu? A message from Genrou?” Kouji looked blank for a moment, then, “Anzu was with Genrou? Why doesn’t anyone tell me anything — I thought she was here! Is she trying to get herself killed? Roaming the mountainside when it’s getting dark is insane for a woman on her own!”

“She’s in the hall, Aniki. She seemed all shook up.” The boy said eagerly. “Will you come — shall I go tell her you’re coming?”

“No point in that, you little idiot.” Kouji cuffed the boy across the back of his head, but there was no malice or force to the gesture, and he shot his companion a grin. “Because I’m coming with you, ain’t I?”

“Yeah, I guess you are.” The boy admitted sheepishly. “Say, Aniki, do you suppose that Genrou’s mounting an assault on Kaou-zan or something?”

“Next time you say Genrou in front of me, I’ll box your ears for real.” Kouji said frankly, as they made their way down to the big hall where the bandits counted their wares. “He’s Kashira to you, even when he’s not here to hear it. Understood? Just because he’s been away doesn’t mean you can treat him with any different respect. You know the way Reikaku-zan works by now — you’ve been here long enough to understand that the kashira wields the tessen and he’s the boss. Got it?”

“Yes, Aniki. Sorry.” The boy flushed, and Kouji shot him a lazy smile.

“Just keep it in mind.” He said evenly.

“Aniki, you call Kashira Ge… that name, though, don’t you?” The boy was not to be repressed for long. “Don’t you?”

“Genrou and I grew up as bandits here together, that’s why. Like brothers. He and I work as a team.” Kouji said simply. “But he’s still kashira, at the end of the day. And I still respect him above all others. You’re way too mouthy, you know that, kid? Though you remind me of him, the way you keep babbling at me about nothing. Tell me something useful, will ya? When Anzu came back — did she say what was wrong? Why Genrou needed me so bad?”

“No. Just that I was to come and find Kouji-aniki as soon as I could, and bring you down.” The boy shook his head, as they reached the

hall itself. “So I did.”

“Right.” Kouji nodded, pushing back the door and stepping into the hall. As he saw Anzu’s white face and registered the apprehension in her eyes, he swallowed his usual door greeting routine, hurrying across towards her as a horrible thought struck him.

“Anzu?” He murmured. “The boy told me Genrou sent you back here — is he in trouble? Has something happened… to him?”

“No. No, but…” Anzu bit her lip, turning her big dark eyes on the acting leader of the Reikaku-zan bandits. “Kouji, something’s happened in Genrou’s village. He and Chichiri are going there now, but they… they need help. Gen… Chi… they wanted you to bring some of the men and head down there as soon as possible. As many as can be spared. I don’t know what… not exactly. But Chichiri looked haunted, when he told me. And… and as I came up here, I thought I saw a red glow on the eastern boundary. Are… is that Genrou’s village? Could it be… fire?”

Kouji’s eyes widened at this, and he cursed, nodding his head.

“Hey, kid, you heard the woman.” He snapped at his messenger, no longer in a mood to indulge the boy’s youthful enthusiasm. “Run and do as she says — get as many of the men together as aren’t drunk or sleepin’ and we’ll head right down there. Tell ’em it’s important — a message from the kashira.”

The boy nodded his head, eyes wide as he absorbed the change in his senior’s demeanour. Without a word he was gone, and Kouji moved to the window, gazing down with growing alarm at the distinctive reddish glow that marked out the region where Tasuki’s village lay. Slowly he nodded.

“Genrou’s family live in that village. No wonder he’s sent for us so urgently.” He murmured. “So we’ll go — it’s the only thing we can do. Even if the place is torched, we can’t let the flames spread to the mountain woodland, and besides… besides, Genrou might not want to live with his family, but he wouldn’t let anything happen to them if he could prevent it. And that’s our job too — to uphold the kashira’s wishes.”

“Kouji? I’m coming too.”

As Kouji made for the door, Anzu’s voice made him pause, and he turned back, eying her doubtfully.

“Anzu, it’s already dangerous enough.” He began, but Anzu shook her head, her eyes hardening.

“I want to help Genrou, as well.” She said softly. “He’s Kashira to me too, you know. I told you before I was going to stay at Reikaku-zan and be a proper bandit, somehow. This is one of those times. And I can’t… you didn’t see his face, when he realised it was his village. I can’t not help him… not when he looked like that.”

Kouji eyed her for a minute. Then he sighed, nodding his head.

“Fine.” He agreed resignedly. “We ain’t got time to argue it. But stick close to us, okay? Don’t try anythin’ stupid. I swore to myself after Reirei died that I wasn’t gonna see any other woman throw her life away, and I’m not gonna let you challenge that promise, even if you are doin’ it for Genrou. Okay?”

“I’ll be careful.” Anzu promised, grabbing Kouji by the hand. “And I’m ready. We should hurry, Kouji — Chichiri said they might already be too late, so there’s no time to lose!”

“Kourin?”

Tamatama stepped carefully between the grave markers, a frown on his heavily made up face as he caught sight of the object of his search. “I had a feeling this is where you’d be. I thought that, after the dream and everything — you might come here.”

Nuriko turned, meeting his companion’s gaze with heavy, clouded eyes.

“Tamatama.” He murmured, and Tamatama nodded, coming to join him beside a carefully marked mound of earth. Above it a carefully carved stone marker denoted that this was the final resting place of the girl called Byakuren, and with a frown, Nuriko’s fingers brushed the surface of the soil.

“This is the one.” He murmured. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Tamatama agreed. “That’s Byakuren’s grave. The girl you considered almost as close as a sister — the one you tried to save from Yukiyasha.”

“I failed.” Nuriko’s voice was flat and resigned.

“In the end, she defended you, not the other way around.” Tamatama shook his head. “She cared about you a lot, Kourin. That’s the truth of it. She made a decision, and that decision was to make sure you survived the battle with the demon Yukiyasha. And it was the right decision, too. If you had died that day, Suzaku would never have been summoned. You had other things to do, and I think

Byakuren knew that. You took her spirit on board, when you left this village the last time. And I think she was content, knowing that you took her with you, in some way or another."

"She died because I wasn't strong enough to protect her." Nuriko glanced at his hands. "I have so much strength, but even so…"

He faltered, then,

"I'm sorry I shouted at you."

Tamatama rested a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Your memories are starting to return, aren't they?" He asked gently. Nuriko nodded his head.

"Bits of them." He agreed slowly. "I can see Byakuren's face, now. Before it was masked in shadow… but now I can see her. I wish… I wish I couldn't, Tamatama. At least when it was just a silhouette, I couldn't see her tears."

He closed his eyes, as tears threatened his own composure, and Tamatama gave him a moment of silence to gather his thoughts together. At length Nuriko raised his head, turning to face his friend.

"I died in Hokkan." He said softly. "Nuriko… Nuriko fought to protect the Priestess of Suzaku. He fought and… he died. Fighting in the snow, in… in Hokkan."

"You didn't die, Kourin." Tamatama shook his head. "You're here now, right? So that's silly. You're not dead. But you probably took an injury… whatever happened to you, it must've been pretty heavy."

"No. I died." Nuriko shook his head. "I remember…"

He ran his fingers down his side, a shiver going down his spine as he did so.

"Claws, here. And blood." He whispered. "A battle in the snow, and blood… all over the landscape. My blood. But I couldn't give up. I couldn't… not fight. Because Miaka was in danger — and I had to… defend her. I had to… she was like… my… sister. And so I couldn't stop. I had to… to win. I couldn't let… another sister die."

"You're confused." Tamatama said gently, but Nuriko shook his head again in frustration, brushing his friend's arm off his shoulder and sending him careering back against the trunk of a nearby tree with a heavy thud as he did so.

"Tamatama?!" Nuriko was on his feet immediately, hurrying down by the other man's side. "I didn't mean to…"

“I’m all right. I can take more bruises than that, don’t worry.” Tamatama picked himself up, eying his friend ruefully. “And you’re still not used to controlling that strength of yours — that’s all. Don’t fret it. I’m not broken.”

“All I do is cause trouble for you, while I’m here. Don’t I?” Nuriko looked sad. “You’ve tried to help me, and I’m grateful. But… I don’t understand what’s happening myself. I remember Hokkan. I remember it clear as day, now. It all slips back into place…”

He frowned, closing his eyes.

“Ashitare.” He added quietly. “See? I even remember his name.”

“Who’s name? You’re not making any sense, Kourin!”

“The one who killed me.” Nuriko raised opaque eyes to his companion’s. “Ashitare. Of the Seiryuu Shichi Seishi. A wolf-man. Like Yukiyasha. My dream… Byakuren… it came back to me, last night. And I remembered what happened… what happened in Hokkan.”

“But you’re not dead. You’re right here in front of me, and if you were dead, I couldn’t touch your arm, now could I?” Tamatama demanded. Nuriko frowned, then held out his hand.

“Give me your knife.” He said quietly. Tamatama stared, then shook his head.

“Not a chance. Not while you’re acting so strangely.” He said firmly. Nuriko’s expression became pleading, and he twitched his hand closer to his companion.

“Please.” He said softly. “Give it to me. I have to see… for myself.”

Tamatama hesitated for a moment, then nodded in defeat, slowly sliding the small, delicate knife that he carried from it’s holder and handing it to his friend, not without misgivings. Nuriko took it, glancing at it for a moment. Then, with a swift, decisive movement, he brought it down across the back of his hand, ignoring the exclamation that his friend made at his action. He flexed his hand thoughtfully, then held it up for his companion to see.

“No blood.” He observed quietly. “And no pain. Not really — just a tingling of skin. I told you. I died in Hokkan. Whatever is happening here… I don’t understand. But I don’t think I’m supposed to be here. I don’t know… anything at all, not really. But either way, I don’t think I’m meant to be in Yukigase.”

Tamatama’s eyes became big with dismay as he grabbed his friend’s hand in his, running his gaze over the jagged line that the knife’s

blade had left across the other man's skin. Sure enough, there was no blood, and the wound had already begun to close up, disappearing and fading against the natural design of his flesh. He swore deeply, eying the Seishi in trepidation.

"This is impossible." he breathed. Nuriko laughed bitterly, nodding his head.

"I know." He agreed. "But I can't explain it. It doesn't make sense to me either. I just know… Nuriko is buried in the Hokkan mountains. And… and he's still there. Whatever I am, I guess… I'm not really him at all."

"You are Kourin." Tamatama shook his head. "You have the mark of the willow, and Kourin's strength, so I have no doubts. But…"

"I must go back to Eiyou. I need to know what's happened to me, and why this is going on." Nuriko said simply.

"Eiyou?" Tamatama blinked, then, "But that's all the way over the other side of the country! Do you even know where it is, or how to get to it? In this state…"

"I *don't* know." Nuriko interrupted him, shaking his head. "But I still have to go there. Didn't you say that's where my family was? If anyone would know the truth, it would be… be them. Wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so." Tamatama frowned. "But even considering that, Kourin, you can't just take off on a journey with your mental state like this. I'd be a poor kind of friend if I let you, too."

"What can happen to me?" Nuriko demanded. "I'm dead. Remember? I died. I don't bleed. I'm not even really here — so why are you so worried about me?"

"Because you're my friend, you silly girl." Tamatama said frankly. "And even if you keep saying it, I don't believe it's true. You're here in front of me, and that means you're real to me. You didn't bleed, fine, but then you're a warrior of Suzaku and I don't know how your body differs from mine now you've accepted that part of your destiny. You're already several times stronger than anyone else in the whole of Kounan, so just because you didn't shed blood in this cold air, it doesn't prove your macabre ideas to me. I'm prepared to believe anything else — but Kourin, you are *not* dead. All right? I can touch you. I can speak to you. You're still here and I don't want you taking any risks because you're confused and disorientated!"

"Even if you're right, I still have to go." Nuriko said evenly. "Because if my family are in Eiyou, answers must be there, too. And

so… that's what I need to do."

Tamatama sighed. Slowly, he nodded his head.

"Then let me provide you with a horse, at least part way." He said reluctantly. "It'll take you as far as the nearest big city and then you can probably find a carriage or something going to the capital. But between there and here is a lot of open land, and I don't want you wandering aimlessly around in the state you're in. You might be able to fight off all comers, but…"

He faltered, eying his companion thoughtfully, then,

"Even better, I'll come with you." He decided. "Between us, we'll both travel to Eiyou. I've never been to the capital, and it would be a chance to see it."

"Tamatama?" Nuriko looked confused. "Why?"

"I told you. We're friends. Peas from the same pod." Tamatama said briskly. Then he grinned, seeing his companion's reticence. "And besides that, even though you left the village a long time ago, you're not someone easily forgotten. You came here, faced a demon, and changed Yukigase forever. Plus, you were my friend, even when others laugh at me. You laughed *with* me — because you understood who I was beyond the make-up and I appreciate that. If you've given up on your existance, well, I'll find a way to snap you out of it and bring back the Kourin who always had a smile, no matter what the situation. Whether you're a girl or a boy, it doesn't matter. You're still that person, somewhere inside. Suzaku Seishi or not, you need a friend right now. And that's what I'm going to be. All right? Any further objections?"

Nuriko stared at him for a moment, then a faint flicker of something stirred in his dark eyes. He smiled.

"All right." He said softly. "We'll go to Eiyou. Together. And find out what really did happen to me in Hokkan. Surely in the city, I must be able to find more of my memories? We'll go there, and we'll unbury this person, Chou Ryuuen. Then, maybe, I'll finally understand what's going on."

As soon as the words left the peasant's mouth, a grim, chilling silence fell over the Souun central square. Then, as if jerked out of some horrible dream, Tasuki's grip clenched on his horse's reins, and without a word he kicked the beast's flanks urgently, sparking it into a gallop as he rode hell for leather through the rest of the town. Behind

him he was vaguely aware of Chichiri's voice and the sound of other hoofbeats, but he did not slow down. Now he understood the look he had seen in his friend's eye, and dread had gripped his own soul as he drew closer and closer to the place which, at one time, he had called his home.

It was a dry evening, and already the bright embers had sparked more than one building ablaze, sending panicked villagers screaming and running for safety as panic ensued. In the flare of red-orange heat, it was hard to tell one homestead from another, and Tasuki cursed, his eyes stinging against the heavy smoke as he struggled to pick out his family's land in amongst all the madness. His beast shied, whinnying in fear beneath him as it balked against going any closer to the raging inferno, but Tasuki was not to be dissuaded and he gave the animal another rough kick, forcing it forwards despite it's obvious prancing and hesitation.

As he drew closer to the centre of the blaze, something made him stop, as a strange, familiar sensation assailed his senses. He blinked once more, eyes streaming now from the sharpness of the thick, acrid smoke that had gathered on the wind, pouring up from the smouldering roofs of the surrounding properties.

At last, he saw the thing that had sent such a strange sensation through his body, and as he drew nearer, he realised that even in among all the melee, there was a patch of ground untouched and unharmed by the lick of flame. In the centre of this almost circular ring of protection, a lone man sat atop a white horse, the beast shying and prancing beneath him in similar fear of the fire all around it. Despite this, however, the figure seemed unmoved, sitting motionless as he regarded the scene before him.

In his hand he clutched the glittering hilt of a distinctively familiar sword, silver blade glowing with hot energy as it crackled and sparked in the night air. He was dressed in simple civilian dress, and he wore no helmet, yet his stance was one of a soldier in battle. His thick dark hair flowed loose across his shoulders, teased and twitched out of place by the rising night breeze.

But it was the man's eyes that gave Tasuki the most unease, for as he drew closer to the rider, he met his gaze across the burning landscape. A mixture of madness, rage and fear flickered there, potent enough to drive deep into Tasuki's own soul and despite himself he gripped more tightly on the reins of his own horse, fumbling for his tessen as he struggled to keep his beast calm.

The other man did not flinch, merely turning his attention back to

the burning landscape, and as if startled out of a daze, Tasuki's eyes widened as realisation sank in.

"What the hell?" He whispered. "*Hotohori… sama*?"

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

For a moment, Tasuki faltered, his eyes not leaving the strange, surreal figure that sat erect atop his white steed. Then his eyes narrowed, and he gripped the tessen more tightly as he prepared to wield it over his head.

"You bastard!" He yelled, as sparks began to fly from the edges of the metal. "Impersonating my friend and burning down my village!? I'll make you pay, you demon — *I'll make you pay*!"

"Tasuki, no!"

Before Tasuki could react, Chichiri pulled his own horse in front of his friend, holding up his hands. "Don't use the tessen — not here! There's already enough fire and panic — we need to help the people, not create more!"

"But that guy… that demon… my village is…" Tasuki swallowed hard, the tears on his cheeks no longer all caused by the sting of smoke, and Chichiri's expression became grave.

"We need to help the villagers." He said again. "This isn't the time for random revenge — this whole village is going to be ash before long and people might get hurt!"

"People?" Fear flickered in Tasuki's bronze eyes at this and he glanced around him frantically. "My parents! Aidou! They're here somewhere! What if…?"

He trailed off, and Chichiri's frown deepened, as he carefully dismounted from his horse. As soon as the beast's reins were loosed, the creature gave a terrified neigh, bolting for the safety of the woodland beyond, and Chichiri watched it go, a troubled look in his ruby eye.

"We're better off on foot. Your horse will bolt too, if you try and take it any nearer to the flames." He said, grabbing the reins of the bandit's steed even as the beast threatened to rear up. "Tasuki, get a hold of yourself. We'll find your family… just get down from there, and that's what we'll do. Okay? Someone needs to get a hold of this place and organise a way of putting out the fire — we're Suzaku's warriors and we have to help the people of Kounan, no matter what!"

This seemed to penetrate Tasuki's daze and he nodded, leaping down from his horse with a thud as he slid the tessen back into it's holder. He turned his gaze on the man on horseback, resentment glittering in his eyes.

"To impersonate a Shichi Seishi ain't a cool thing to do, but to do it to do something like this…" He muttered, clenching his fists as his character burned brightly on his right forearm. "You do something about the villagers, Chichiri. Find my family — my sister, my parents. I'm going to have some words with the demon here — before he sets fire to anyone else."

"Can't you feel it?" Chichiri grabbed him back, shaking his head. "That's not a demon. At least, right now, it's not."

"But…" Tasuki faltered, casting his friend a bewildered glance, and slowly Chichiri nodded.

"That's his Highness." He said softly.

"No way!" Tasuki shook his head firmly. "That ain't Hotohori-sama! He's such a quiet, gentle kinda guy — he ain't the sort of man to go burning down villages on a random whim!"

"I'm sure it's not a random whim… and I can't explain what's going on." Chichiri said helplessly. "But… it's still him, Tasuki. It's his chi. Don't you sense it, this close? The character on his neck — I can see it from here. It's flaring with energy— the same kind of energy as came out of my *kasa* on the mountainside. Something's really wrong with him, true, but it's still Hotohori-sama."

"I don't believe it." Tasuki whitened. "His Highness… did all this?"

Chichiri nodded.

"Right now, that's not the important thing." He returned. "People could be hurt — Tasuki, put it out of your mind and help me stop the fire!"

"Right." Tasuki shook his head as if to clear it, glancing around him for some kind of inspiration. "How are we gonna do that? The nearest river's a good fifteen minutes trek away into the hills and my tessen ain't exactly any use to me in this situation, like you said. Can you put a barrier up? Something? Can't you use your powers at all?"

As the words left his mouth, the figure on the horse turned to face them, lifting his sword as he arced it down in a purposeful swing. Bright red flame flared from the blade, coursing across the ground towards them, and Chichiri muttered a curse, bringing his fingers up

sharply as he rebounded the fire and diffused it's flare into harmless ash.

"That was close." He reflected. "All right. If Anzu's got to Kouji, your men should be here soon, too. I hope. Meanwhile, I'm going to try and pull a barrier over this place and stamp out the flames. My powers still aren't fully recovered from before, but I'll do my best. You worry about getting villagers out of the centre of this — I can't guarantee that buildings won't fall down even if I do put the fire out somehow."

"Got you." Tasuki nodded grimly, darting into the midst of the swirling villagers and pulling off his jacket, tossing it down onto the burning remains of an old cart. As it smouldered out, he gathered himself, leaping up on top of the half-charred contraption as he sought to gain people's attention.

"Listen to me, you bunch of squealing idiots, you're gonna get yourself killed if you hang around here!" He exclaimed. "Get out of the village, dammit, and go now!"

At the sound of his voice, some of the frightened villagers stopped in their panic and turned to face him, awe and recognition flickering across their faces as they absorbed the speaker. In the darkness, with his profile illuminated by the flare of the flames and the red wings character blazing on his forearm, Tasuki really did appear sent from the heavens to help them, and a couple of people pushed their hands together in desperate prayers of thanksgiving. Tasuki frowned, grabbing the tessen from his back and bringing it down hard against the edge of a nearby wall.

"Are you listening to me!?" He yelled. "Get the hell out! Go that way — towards the mountain path! Reikaku-zan is right ahead — you can get help there. But don't stay here, you bunch of morons. Get going!"

He hit the tessen against the building again, sending chips of plaster and stone cascading to the ground, and this was all the incentive the already jumpy villagers needed to react. As if running from the fire of a loaded pistol, as one person they fled in the direction Tasuki had indicated, and the bandit sighed, biting his lip as he judged whether or not they would make it out of the settlement before the buildings around them started to come to the ground.

"I damn well hope Kouji's on his way." He muttered, even as he leapt down from his perch, turning to scan the landscape for Chichiri. "We can't do this on our own, even with Chichiri's powers."

As he located the monk, he realised that Chichiri's magic was having some, if limited progress against the blaze, stifling the air and providing blocks between the burning buildings as the flames slowly began to die out. The figure on horseback had not given up, however, and as he brought his sword down again, Tasuki let out a yell, darting forward with his tessen outstretched as he deflected the flare back towards the other man. Chichiri, who had been entirely focused on his task turned at the last minute, but it was too late for him to put up any kind of a boundary, and as Tasuki fell hard onto the dusty, charred ground, the monk hurried to his side.

"Tasuki? Are you all right?"

"Don't ask me that, you moron. I just stopped you from getting frittered." Tasuki pulled himself into a sitting position, as the figure on the horse raised his sword for another try. "But we need to do something about that guy, Chichiri. Hotohori-sama or not, we do. It's takin' all your focus to stop this place from being totally torched, and the fire could still spread into other places if we don't get it under control. Soon as we put something out, though, he's going to use that cursed sword and set light to another bunch of stuff. It's sort of a problem."

"Cursed sword…" Chichiri's eyes widened as his companion's words sank in, and he nodded, getting to his feet.

"You're right." He agreed. "Hotohori's sword is acting completely contrary to the way it's meant to act. It's spewing fire like your tessen, but it's not normal fire. It's like the light we saw before, like blood. Like the two things are connected, and they probably are. Hotohori-sama was the Emperor of Kounan, after all… it's almost like he's become an antithesis of the God he was created to serve… at least, that's what it seems like to me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tasuki grimaced. "While you're theorising and philosophising, he's going to blaze this place to pieces!"

Chichiri pursed his lips, eying the sinister figure of the former Emperor thoughtfully for a moment. Then he brought his hands up before his face, closing his eyes as he muttered an incantation. As he thrust out his hand towards the figure on horseback, a flare of pure energy shot across the landscape, hitting the man square in the chest and knocking him bodily from his horse, sending the sword clattering across the ground.

"I thought we weren't gonna hurt him?" Tasuki objected, and

Chichiri shook his head.

“I didn’t. I just…” He paused, gesturing towards the figure who stumbled to get up, putting a hand to his head as if waking from some dark, tormented dream. The monk took a few steps forward, but faltered as the former Emperor raised his head, doubt and anguish flaring in his normally gentle eyes. He fumbled for the sword, but even as his fingers closed around the blade, his entire form flickered and disappeared, and the white horse, no longer guarded by the strange spell his rider had been under reared up, bolting into the night in the direction Chichiri’s own horse had taken.

“He’s gone.” Tasuki stated the obvious, getting to his feet and moving to the patch of unburnt earth where the horse had stood. “What the hell was that, Chichiri? What the hell is going on?”

“Genrou!” Before Chichiri could answer, Kouji’s voice came out of the darkness, and both warriors turned to see the Reikaku-zan number two, a gathering of men in tow. Anzu, wrapped in her cloak and with her eyes big and fearful at the chaos was also there, but Tasuki’s attention was more caught by the fact the bandits had not come unprepared. Each of them bore a vessel containing water from the mountain river, and at a flick of Kouji’s fingers, they began to spread out across the still flaming village, dispersing their burdens in an attempt to quiet the fire.

“Just in the nick of time, as ever.” Genrou offered his friend an unsteady smile. “Good thinkin’. I owe ya.”

“Anzu said she thought it was fire, and we could see it from the slopes.” Kouji said quietly. “Sorry it took so long, but we figured we were better comin’ prepared.”

“No, you did right. I’m glad.” Genrou nodded. “But this place is a mess. Still, at least it won’t spread into the mountains now, or the other villages… that’s something, right?”

“Genrou… what about your family?” Kouji asked hesitantly. Genrou faltered, then bit his lip.

“Don’t know.” He admitted slowly. “I chased a bunch of villagers outta the place, before things got worse than they were. But I don’t know if anyone is still here. Or… anything else. We were kind of preoccupied with the fire and everything… I haven’t had a chance to think about it.”

“Shun’u?”

A faltering voice from behind them made both the bandits turn, and

Tasuki's heart skipped a beat as he registered the pitiful figure that stood before him. Wrapped in a soot-spattered cloak, her cheeks wet with tears and her long thick hair flowing loose and messy over her shoulders, for the first time in his life the bandit almost did not recognise his older sister. She stepped forward, stumbling slightly, and almost instinctively Tasuki hurried to catch her, slipping an arm around her shoulders as he hauled her to her feet.

"Aidou." He murmured. "Dammit, are you… are you all right?"

"I am." Aidou raised uncharacteristically empty eyes to her brother. "I… I was coming to find you. Mother said… get Shun'u, he… he should come and protect… protect the family. But there was so much smoke and it was so confusing, I couldn't s… see…"

She coughed, and Tasuki bit his lip, registering the fact that his companion had inhaled a fair bit of the smoke as she had made her way through the village. "I didn't think I could make it to the mountain. But you… you are here. So I guess Mother was right. You did come to protect us, after all."

"Damn right I did." Tasuki said firmly. "Where are Ma and Pa, anyway? Did they get out all right?"

Aidou shrugged her shoulders.

"They were still at the farm when I… left." She admitted chokily. "Somethin' fell on Pa's leg and Ma wouldn't leave him. So I came… on my own."

"Genrou?" Anzu stepped forward at this moment, uncertainty in her expression, but Tasuki wheeled on her, impatience in his gaze.

"Get out of my way, will you? I haven't got time for you right now." He snapped, his tones unusually harsh. "Kouji? Chichiri? I'm going back to my parents' house. Aidou got out, but Ma and Pa haven't."

"What about your other sisters, Aidou-san? Are they in trouble, too?" Chichiri asked, as Anzu bit her lip, flinching at the redhead's terse words. It was Aidou who shook her head this time, however, swallowing hard as she sought to regain her usual steely composure.

"My sisters… are all married now." She said unsteadily. They live in… neighbouring villages, since the war. It's just me… and Ma… and Pa at home. Now Shun'u… is away."

"Well, Shun'u ain't away right now. So let's get going." Tasuki said sharply. "Kouji, make sure the fires are put out here, okay? And take

care of Aidou for me, too, huh? No sense her going back into danger if the farm is still blazin'. This battle ain't a place for a woman, and she'll just get in my way. Chichiri, will you come with me? I might need your help."

"I'm already with you, you know." Chichiri said gravely. "Lead the way — I'm right behind you."

Tasuki relinquished his grip on his still shuddering sister, and Kouji immediately stepped forward, slipping his own night cloak from his shoulders as he wrapped it over the top of the shivering young woman.

"Genrou'll see things okay." he said quietly. "Hey, Anzu, make yourself useful and come look after Aidou, huh? You're a woman, right? Girls are always better at that kind of thing than guys."

"Huh?" Anzu started, staring at him in confusion, and Kouji gestured to his traumatised burden.

"Come look after Aidou." He repeated. "If you wanna do something for Genrou, then come do this, okay? I'm going to help put out the fire, and that ain't no place for a girl, just like the kashira said."

Anzu hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head slowly, and Tasuki, seeing that his sister was all right grabbed Chichiri roughly by the arm, pulling him in the direction of the Kou family farmstead. The blaze had burned itself out by this time, thanks to Chichiri's barriers, but even as they reached it, however, it was clear that the flames had torn through the buildings with little mercy. Tasuki faltered, swearing profusely under his breath as he registered the devastation.

"Could anyone have survived that?" He asked softly. Chichiri's brows knitted together, then he nodded.

"There's life inside. Two distinct signals." He agreed. "I think your parents made it through, Tasuki, but they probably need our help. If your father was hurt…"

"Don't have to tell me twice." At this, Tasuki was galvanised once more into action, pushing aside scorched timbers and blackened thatching as he forced his way into the property. "Which direction are they, Chichiri? You can feel these things stronger than me — and the whole building might come down on them at this rate!"

"To your left. A little further along." Chichiri flung out an arm to indicate, and Tasuki nodded grimly, obediently changing direction.

"I still can't believe Hotohori'd do something like this. No matter

whether his sword was cursed or what." He said frankly, as between them the two men shoved aside fallen debris to reach the room in which Chichiri still sensed the life forces of two people. "It don't make a bit of sense."

"I know." Chichiri acknowledged. "And I'm not sure that his sword was the reason, really. It's just…"

"But you said…"

"I know." Chichiri slipped his fingers between a slat in the wall timbers, forcing the broken beam aside. "But it was more that the flame it was giving off was like the power that came out of my hat. Taiitsukun gave Hotohori that sword and Taiitsukun's home is… not right, right now. That was the connection I was making."

"When he fell off his horse, he looked… confused. Like he wasn't sure where he was." Tasuki grunted as he lifted a particularly awkward slab of stone. "Dammit, this place is worse than I thought. You're sure they're still alive in here, Chichiri? You're certain?"

"One hundred percent, you know." Chichiri agreed. "They're not far ahead, now. We're almost there — so be careful where you're throwing things, okay? You don't want to accidentally bring the roof down on them. Looks to me that they sheltered in the strongest room in the place, which just goes to show that your parents have more lateral thinking than you do, you know?"

"Shut up. This ain't a time for joking." Tasuki said grimly. "As for his Highness, is this gonna happen again? Should we be lookin' for him, or what?"

"I think we should, and Nuriko, too." Chichiri admitted. "When we've seen to this place, of course. Your family and the people here come first — we'll work out what to do about Hotohori-sama once it's certain that everyone is safe."

"Nuriko again." Tasuki frowned. "Do you think he's gone mad and stuff, too? Settin' fire to villages or something else crazy?"

"No, it's not that." Chichiri's expression became thoughtful. "I just think we should. The look on his Highness's face… the determination when he wielded his sword at us. I've only seen him look that intense when flying into battle. I wonder, you know… whether he really knew we were here at all. Or if… if he was… well… dreaming."

"Sleep-arson?" Tasuki exclaimed, dropping the slab he had been moving and narrowly missing Chichiri's toes as he did so. "Are you kidding me? Are you seriously suggesting a dead dude went on a

rampage in my village because he was having a bad *dream*?"

"I guess we'll find out when we find him." Chichiri shrugged. "But you're right, his expression did change. His chi didn't, though. It was still him, but… not entirely him. Nuriko's was the same. Him, but not entirely. It's sort of strange, really."

"Well, right now we do as you say. We save this village and make sure noone else gets to attackin' it." Tasuki said smartly. "Then we'll worry about Hotohori and Nuriko and what else is going on. If this is Taiitsukun's fault, I'll be having words to say about it, I'm telling you — noone flames my village and gets away with it. Someone is going to pay for this big time — you have my word on that."

"Are… are you feeling better now?"

Anzu sat hesitantly down beside her companion, casting her a doubtful look as she settled herself more comfortably on the remains of Tasuki's charred cart. Back in the scorched centre of the village, Kouji and his bandit companions had brought the blaze under control, and now that the hot light and warmth of the fire had abated, it was clear exactly how much devastation the raid had caused. Few, if any buildings still stood unmarred, and the entire settlement was caked in black ash, sodden and trampled as the men had gone about their work. They had operated a tireless system of fire-fighting and water fetching, and even though several of them had been sweating from exertion by the end of it, Kouji had kept them at it, his expression resolute as he worked to prevent an outbreak of fire across the other mountain villages. His own face was smeared with soot and sweat, and Anzu had been struck by the dedication with which the bandits all adhered without question or complaint to Tasuki's firm, sharp orders. She sighed, rubbing her temples as she remembered how snappish he had been to her.

"I'll be all right." Aidou spoke now, startling her out of her thoughts, and she turned to glance at the other woman, taking in her features carefully in the moonlight. "Are you one of Shun'u's bandits, then? I didn't think he liked women around. He certainly never has any manners dealing with 'em, that's for sure."

"I… I guess… sort of." Anzu faltered, realising that despite her words she didn't wholly know what she was. "I mean, I was a circus performer, but since my sister died I… I guess I've come here. So… yes. I suppose that is what I am."

She stopped, swallowing hard, then,

“Did Genrou say… are you his sister?”

Aidou nodded, offering her companion a droll smile.

“Genrou.” She echoed derisively. “Such a stupid name.”

“I… I’m sorry. It’s just…”

“It’s all right. It’s not your brain that cooked it up.” Aidou shrugged her shoulders. “And yes, to answer your question. Shun’u’s my younger brother… not that he’s ever been attentive where the family’s concerned. He’s always been the kind to slack off — stare at the hills instead of gettin’ down to work an’ doin’ his share. Still… still tonight…”

She trailed off, uttering a sigh.

“If he’d been at home, tonight, it might have been different.” She reflected. “But he still came, when he knew there was trouble. So I guess… at least he did one thing right, didn’t he? Just… if he took his responsibilities seriously…”

“Genrou risked his life to fight the fire here, and he risked the lives of Kouji and the others as well.” Anzu responded hotly. “He isn’t a flake, you know — he came to help his village and he’s gone to rescue your parents, right now! You should be grateful to him for coming at all!”

Aidou’s eyes flickered slightly at this, and Anzu flushed, realising how rude her words had sounded.

“I… I’m sorry.” She said apologetically, holding up her hands. “I don’t have any right to speak to you like that. Especially not right at the moment.”

“You like my brother, then?” Aidou tilted her head on one side. “Is that true? Is that why you’re really with these bandit rogues of his — because you seek my brother’s favour in all of this?”

“I…” Anzu reddened further, and Aidou offered a slight, cynical smile.

“Shun’u doesn’t like women.” She said softly. “He’s always been that way, since I can remember. He seems to think that we smothered him — and damn it, we made him do his share of the work. But he was the only boy of the house, so he kinda took it resentfully… like he was special, or something. Anyhow, he ran away when he was fifteen and he’s only come back spasmodically since then. Livin’ in the mountains with a bunch of men like they’re playin’ hunting games around the trees… he’s still a boy, my younger brother. You’ll be

waiting a long time, if that's your game… you'd do better to give up and go back to your circus. Shun'u isn't ever going to notice you, and you know, you're pretty enough that you shouldn't be hanging around waiting for him to, either."

"I didn't even know his name, before tonight." Anzu sighed, glancing at her hands. "I mean, I knew… I knew he was Genrou. And that he was Tasuki, of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. But you called him Shun'u — I didn't even think about the fact he had a real name and a… a family, outside of the bandits. He mentions his sisters, sometimes, but even so… I didn't think about you… being real."

She sighed.

"The way he blazed down here, when he knew you were in trouble." She murmured absently. "He really cares about all of you — I never saw that side of him before."

"Sure. He cares." Aidou's lips twitched into an empty smile. "He's a lazy, good-for-nothing layabout when he chooses, but his heart, I guess, is in the right place. He was raised by women, after all, even if he likes to call himself a man. Couldn't possibly grow up without some sense of human feeling in him, even if he is the most stupid boy the village has ever spawned."

Anzu gazed at her older companion, taking in her demeanour carefully for a moment as she digested the other's words. Then she smiled slightly, a look of understanding in her eyes.

"You love your brother a lot too, I think." She said reflectively. "I understand that… I loved my sister a lot, too. Even now she's not here, I still do. So I guess, even when Gen… when Shun'u decided to go to the mountains, you still loved him. And he came to rescue you tonight, so he still cared what happened to you. There was only just my sister and I, though. It must've been more difficult for your family, with so many of you."

"I have three sisters." Aidou agreed. "But in the last eighteen months, they've all found husbands and settled away from home. Now's the time when Mother and Father most needed Shun'u's help around the farm, but instead he's away playing drinking games with his buddies up on Reikaku-zan. It's not surprising, knowing the boy, but… when this happened…"

She shook her head.

"He should have been here." She said firmly. "He's unmarried, and he's the youngest, and his duty is to protect us before any stupid

bandit army. Suzaku's work, that's one thing. We couldn't escape that, when the mark appeared on his arm. But this whole thing tonight… if he'd been here…"

She faltered, eying her companion speculatively.

"I'm serious, when I say you shouldn't hold out your hopes for him." She added. "Shun'u will never fully grow up, or accept responsibility in any real way. You'd do better finding a more level kind of man to make your future with. Shun'u will more likely get you killed than make you happy — if he even bothers to notice that you're there. You can't be so very old yet, can you? You don't look older than he is, so you must have prospects yet."

"I'm seventeen." Anzu flushed again, not liking how easily this woman made her feel inadequate and out of place. "And Genrou's nineteen, so… so it's not that big a gap."

"Seventeen is a good age to find a husband." Aidou said pensively. "But you won't find one, hanging around on bandit mountain with my little brother."

"Aidou-san, can I ask… how old you are?" Anzu asked falteringly. Aidou pursed her lips, then she shrugged.

"Twenty four this spring." She admitted. "Most women my age are either wed or bound to their families — I'm probably the latter. With Shun'u not taking responsibility, someone has to. I probably won't be finding a husband now anyway — I'm too old. So you should listen to me, while you're not. Else you'll wind up alone and miserable — and cursing my brother for breaking your heart too, most likely. That's what those fighting types do, in the end, one way or another. We've tried to bang sense into Shun'u's stonewall skull, but it hasn't seemed to work any. So I'll counsel you instead — if you really want to be happy or secure in life, leave my brother alone. He and his kind — they won't make you happy. Take it as advice from one woman to another… it just won't work."

Anzu frowned, uncertain what to say, and silence elapsed between them for a few moments. Then the young acrobat summoned her courage, sending the older woman a sidelong glance.

"You know, he'll rescue them all right. Your parents." She said softly. "Genrou, I mean. He'll do it."

"Yeah, I know he will." Aidou said evenly. "He's always the hero of the hour when it involves last minute heroics. I know he and that monk friend of his will save them, and because of that, I'm not

worried. Not any more. But the farm… everything else… our livelihoods. Those can't be saved so easily. Our crops, our produce, our survival for the next few months. All of that is gone. This village is destroyed. Whether people come back or they don't, I have no idea. Even if Shun'u can rescue Ma and Pa, it doesn't mean he's saved everything. You're looking at things idealistically, but it's not so simple as that."

Anzu frowned, casting her gaze around the fire-torn village as she realised her companion was right. Slowly she nodded.

"I see what you mean." She admitted. "But… there must be something that can be done."

"What's the point in even trying?" Aidou spread her hands helplessly. "There are no more crops, so there's nothing to sell at market. There's no food, and there will be no new ones grown. There'll be no money to buy the things we need. Even without this, it's not easy, scraping a living in a place like this. Now the farm and everything is gone… it'll be damn impossible. Suzaku might be able to rise from the ashes, girl, but real people — it's not so easy. This village is dead — it was dead before the second building set ablaze."

She jerked her hand in the direction of Kouji and his bandit companions.

"Those men, they aren't fighting to save this village." She added. "They're working to save the neighbouring ones, and the mountain slopes. They know as well as I do that this one's destroyed. You can't rebuild when it's like this. Since the war with Kutou, there's been no devastation as awful as this anywhere in Kounan, I'd bet my life on it. And then, at least, when it was war, well, when things were settled, there was money given by the Imperial House to help pay for the damages. But this ain't a product of war. This is our own bad luck. In this situation, every family has a struggle to survive. At times like that, everyone counts. Shun'u should've been here before this. If he had been, maybe this place wouldn't have fallen quite so easily."

"You shouldn't blame Genrou because he wasn't here when the fire began." Anzu shook her head. "It's not his fault this happened, Aidou-san. And he's doing his best."

"Yeah, I'm sure that he is." Aidou sighed. "And there are limits to what he can do, I realise that. But…"

She lapsed back into silence, and Anzu found she had nothing she could say.

“Kouji told me to look after her, but she doesn’t seem to be ill or shaken as much as he thought.” She mused. “At least, she’s angry about her village but… her focus… she seems a strong person, not a weak one. Someone who survives, not someone who’s easily a victim. She’s so critical of Genrou, too, though — is that why he chose to live so far from home? And yet, he loves his family, sure enough. And I think… I think she loves him too. I just… I can’t make her out. She doesn’t look like him — not really. But there’s something just as stubborn and frustrating about her as there is about him.”

She tilted her head, eying the girl again, and taking in her features more carefully as she hunted for a family resemblance. Aidou’s hair was a shade or two darker, cascading in a tousled mess around her shoulders that reminded her of Genrou’s own wild, rampant locks. Her complexion was fair, if touched by working outside in the sun, and her features well-defined, although Anzu fell short of calling her beautiful. There was something both delicate and determined in her expression, and somehow Anzu felt that if Genrou was the wolf, his sister was the mountain lion, for it seemed certain that very little would get past her focused, almost predatorial gaze. She was more slightly built than her brawny younger brother, and yet Anzu realised that it would not be hard to be intimidated by her, for now that the initial shock of the fire had subsided, she was fast resuming her normal, sturdy demeanour. The fingers that folded absently in her lap were delicately proportioned, yet calloused and rough at the tips from hard work, and Anzu smiled slightly, realising that this summed up the contradiction that was Genrou’s older sister.

“She’s not one thing nor the other. She might be a girl, and she might not be muscled or well built, but she’s strong and you wouldn’t cross her.” She reflected ruefully. “I guess if Genrou *is* scared of her… I can see why. Strikes me that she’d be a hard taskmaster — a difficult person to please.”

At that moment, there was a sudden fleeting shadow above their heads, as Chichiri’s *kasa* appeared in the sky, the monk and his companion re-materialising on the ground. With them were Tasuki’s parents, his substantially built mother wrapped in Chichiri’s *kesa* and his father, a thin, pathetic specimen of a man clutching tightly to his son’s shirt as the bandit laid him gently down on the ground. Blood soaked through the leg of the old farmer’s clothing, but aside from this, he did not seem to be seriously hurt, and Anzu let out an inward sigh of relief.

“Guess it’s working now, you know.” Chichiri caught his hat, gazing at it pensively for a moment before putting it back on his head. “Good

to know."

"Everything's gone." Tasuki glanced around him, as, now that the panic was over, he truly absorbed the state of the village where he had spent his early years. At his words, Aidou got to her feet, cuffing him smartly across the back of the head.

"Don't just stand there, staring at it." She snapped. "Are you just going to leave Father in the middle of the street like that? And what about the other villagers? Now you've done your saving the world routine, do you think maybe you can stop and think a little bit about your family and what you're going to do now?"

"Hey, leave off!" Tasuki put up his hands to prevent another attack. "Aidou, get a grip, would ya? Chichiri and I, and Kouji and the boys, we've just put the damn fire out already. I just ploughed through feet of rubble to rescue Ma and Pa and what happens? First *she* hits me for taking so long to get there and now *you're* goin' at me too! Dammit, woman, can't you even take a break for a moment?"

"Tasuki." Chichiri rested a hand on his friend's shoulder, gesturing to the remains of the village with his other arm. "This is a lot of people's homes, right here. I guess you can understand… why Aidou-san is upset."

"Damn, I understand. I understand, okay? I'm not completely stupid." Tasuki muttered, running his fingers through his thick red hair. "I get it. I get it! The village is mashed. But what, exactly, do you think I can do about it? I can't wave my damn tessen and make everything go back to how it was before."

He happened to catch his mother's eye at this, and Anzu observed with detached amusement that he took a hurried step back, almost as if he expected the woman to scold him for his petulant attitude. He grimaced, gazing up at the sky.

"I guess, if there are still people hangin' around here, we'd better take them to the mountain." He said at length. "Kouji! Hey! Are there any other people still in the village? Did you find anyone else who needs our help?!"

"I'm guessing everyone fled at the sight of flames." Kouji called back, brushing the dust from his hands as he shook his head. "But there were people gatherin' at the foot of the mountain, when we came down. I sent some of the men to take care of them — I figured you'd want to bring them back to the base, if there wasn't any other way. Bein' that it's your village an' all — I guessed that's what you'd do."

Tasuki's face cleared, and he nodded his head.

"Right. Then we go back to Reikaku-zan." He said slowly. "Chichiri, tomorrow, you an' I, we're gonna get to the bottom of this. We're gonna track down Hotohori, if we can, an' we're gonna see that no other villages get burnt to a cinder because of whatever's goin' on on Taikyoku-zan. Okay?"

"I think that would be the best idea." Chichiri agreed soberly. "But what about your family? Your father's hurt, and your farm…"

Tasuki cast a brief glance back in the direction of the farm, then shrugged.

"The place is busted." He said bluntly. "There's no point in sticking around here to watch it rot. And while we're lookin' for Hotohori, we can look for Mitsukake, too. I don't think Pa's leg is too bad, but I think it is broken. Maybe if we can find him, it'll be a quicker fix than hangin' around on Reikaku-zan."

"Go up the mountain? With your bandits?" Aidou looked disturbed, and Tasuki grimaced at her.

"Oneechan, there ain't anywhere else for you to go." He said frankly. "I wouldn't worry about it, if you think any of the guys would try it on with you. Believe me, they're not blind, or stupid!"

"Ouch." Anzu winced internally at this remark, and Aidou, who had more than recovered from her shock, was just as quick to react, bringing her hand down hard against the back of his head once more.

"You shut your face." She ordered. "Fine. We're coming up the mountain. Now bring Pa and stop acting like someone just crashed your house party, okay? It's about time you did something with your family in mind for once — if we're going, let's get going!"

"Geez." Tasuki grumbled under his breath, but he did as he was bidden, scooping his father up in his arms once more as he turned to meet Kouji's amused gaze with a rueful one of his own.

"Right. Reikaku-zan." He said simply. "Any stragglers we meet on the way, bring 'em too. At least for tonight. Tomorrow… we'll see how things are. But right now, I've had my fill of this place for one evening. It's gettin' late and there's nothing more we can do here. Let's go."

Random Babble:

*I haven't footnoted **Kou Aidou**, but it just occurred to me that although she appears in the manga, her name there is different, because it's the Chinese version. I think it's Ai Tong or something like that — I can't remember without digging through my books for the right one. Either way, she's Tasuki's sister from the manga, in case anyone is confused. Aidou is just the Japanese reading of her name* □

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

The palace was in darkness, and everyone of any importance had retired to bed for the night as the moon hung high in the sky, gazing down at the citizens of the world below. Within the sturdy confines of the elaborate royal building, the Emperor's widow, Lady Houki and her young son, the new ruler of all Kounan slept peacefully, not knowing that, barely metres from the palace gate, a lone man stood staring up at the carved designs with hollow, uncomprehending eyes.

What had drawn him to this place, he wasn't quite sure. The image of a woman and the cry of a baby had penetrated his thoughts strongly enough to wake him from his stupor, and he had risen to find himself in a dark corner of an Eiyou street, cold and alone with no idea of who he was or how he had come to be there. A silver-bladed sword had lain at his right hand, it's hilt gold and ruby as if signifying some divine connection, and although he had no idea how he had come to possess it, he had slipped it carefully into the belt of his tunic, unwilling to let it go. It was as if, he reflected sadly, it was the last connection to a life he had forgotten — to something he could almost picture in his mind, but which was obscured by cloud and fog.

"What is this place?" He murmured softly, taking a hesitant step or two forward. "Why do I feel like I should be here? Like this is… some kind of… home for me? Have I been here before? Is there something important I must do here? I don't understand."

"Halt! Who goes there?"

A sharp voice from the darkness made him start, turning to face a man dressed in the smart uniform of the Imperial Guard, and he bit his lip, taking a step back as he realised the man was wielding a weapon of his own. As the moonlight cast down on the stranger's face, however, the guard's eyes opened wide with disbelief, and the sword slipped from his grip as he fumbled his hands together in a hurried prayer. His face had drained of all colour, and he swallowed hard, as if trying to understand what he saw.

"…S… Saihitei-sama?" He choked out.

The man with the gold and red hilted sword started at this, staring at the man in surprise.

“Do you know… who I am?” He asked faintly. The guard seemed even more terrified by this, and he dropped to the ground, prostrating himself on the stone.

“Forgive me for offending the Emperor’s ghost.” He babbled. “Houki-sama has always been convinced you still walk the halls here, to protect her and her baby son from harm. But I’ve always thought it a story — the grief of a heartbroken lady. Now you’ve come to punish me, for not believing in the spirit of the man who ruled Kounan!”

The man’s eyes opened wide as he digested the guard’s words.

“Ruled… Kounan?” He whispered, and as he did so, faint flickers of images buzzed through his brain, disconnected and disjointed as they sought to disorientate him. He stumbled, forcing them away, and as he did so, the face of a woman flickered across his consciousness, tears in her eyes as she looked at him.

“H..Houki.” He murmured, reaching out a hand as if she were really there in front of him, but the image was gone as soon as it had appeared, and he let his arm drop back down by his side, suddenly deflated.

“Saihitei.” He said the word slowly and carefully, no emotion in his voice.

“Your Highness, forgive me.” The guard raised his head, still eying his companion in awe and fright. “Don’t punish me for my lack of faith — please, sire, I beg you!”

“Why would I punish you?” A slight, bitter smile twitched across Saihitei’s lips, and he shook his head, gazing up at the palace as he did so. “You at least have told me my name. That’s more than all the stars in the sky have been able to do this night.”

“…Sire?”

The guard was clearly confused at this, but Saihitei took no notice, his gaze drawn by the constellations that glittered atop the palace roof.

“Those stars.” He murmured. “Something about them… something alive, and yet…”

“I didn’t know that spirits watched the stars, your Highness.” The guard was wary now, uncertain of his ground, and Saihitei turned, offering him another empty smile.

“Tell me, do you know the names of those stars?” He asked, gesturing to the sky. The Guard’s eyes widened, but, seemingly

thinking it was some kind of test, he nodded.

“Yes, sire. The stars of Suzaku are known by everyone, sire. Everyone in Kounan.” He gabbled. “T… Tasuki, Hotohori, Mitsukake, Chichiri, Chiriko, Tamahome, Nuriko. The seven stars of Suzaku, sire. Everyone knows them. Everyone.”

“Seven.” Saihitei’s expression became thoughtful. “But there are only six constellations that I can see. How strange. There are usually seven, you say?”

“Six?” The man stared upwards, properly looking at the sky for the first time, and he drew breath sharply as he realised his companion was right. He cast Saihitei a sidelong glance, and it was impossible for his face to become any paler.

“Stars disappearing and the Emperor’s ghost walking the palace walls. This can’t be a good omen.” He murmured softly, more to himself than to Saihitei, but the man heard him anyway, drawing his brows together in a frown.

“The Emperor’s… ghost?” This time, the term registered. “What do you mean?”

“Sire, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean offence!” Now the guard was terrified, and something in his panicked demeanour elicited more memories from Saihitei’s mist-cloaked brain. Snapshots of a village, burning, and a man on horseback, dressed in blue and silver with his fair hair flowing in the wind…

He clutched at his head, as fear stabbed through him, penetrating to the depths of his soul. He did not know why this man should cause him such pain, or why, in front of this place, he should remember the pain and devastation of a world that seemed a mile away. And yet, as he brought himself back to some level of composure, he registered the brush of soot on his hands, and a chill touched his heart.

“Fire?” He whispered, turning back towards where the guard had stood, but the man’s fear had proven too much for him, and despite his patrol duties, he had fled. Saihitei sighed, for a moment feeling very alone. Then he gazed up at the stars once again.

“I came here for a reason.” He murmured. “Houki… Houki was the reason? Houki and… Boushin. Why are those names so resonant within me? I wish I understood — I wish I remembered more. That man… he called me a ghost. Am I dead, then? But if so — how is it I can touch the walls of this place? What is going on?”

As he stood there, he saw the woman’s face again, tears streaming

down her cheeks as she held out her hands to him.

"*Please, come back to me safety, Heika.*" She whispered, her voice choked and full of emotion. "*Fight this battle, but don't leave me. Don't leave… don't leave us. Your son… your son and I… we need you. Please, Heika. Come back safely.*"

He held out his fingers once more, but she seemed to draw further and further away from him, and a deep pang of regret settled itself inside his heart.

"Was that… Houki?" He wondered sadly. "Should I go further — and find out? But… but that man… he called me a ghost. *Can* I go back?"

The darkness seemed to provide no answers, however, and as he leant up against the outer wall of the palace grounds, he found himself cast back to another time, when men wielded swords all around him, and blood and death were mingled in the air. So much pain, so much devastation, as fires ripped through villages and burned through crops and houses. Parents seperated from children, and the screams of babies whose mothers lay dead beside them. The images came thick and fast now and he crumpled to the ground, sobbing pitifully as he sought to push the pictures away. They came with relentless force, however, and somewhere in the midst of all of this, he saw the spectre of a young man, red hair blazing as he wielded something silver and glittering in his hand. At this, Saihitei's eyes snapped open, and he clenched his fists tightly, fighting to remember who the man was.

"Something to do with… the stars." He murmured. "But… so many people… so much suffering. If… If I am Saihitei, how can I go back? How can I face Houki, or anyone else, if it is truly how I saw it? If I was the one to bring so much pain and devastation to Kounan… how can I expect anyone to want to see me? If so many deaths do indeed fall to my bad judgement… then I should not be here. I should not stay… not in this place."

He turned, making his way slowly away from the palace as the blurry memories continued to tease and taunt at his senses. In the midst of it all, the face of the woman haunted him most of all.

"I couldn't come back to you, Houki." He whispered, as tears continued to run down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't come back."

"So, what happens now?"

Kouji hopped down onto a boulder, casting his kashira a sidelong glance as he offered him a smile. It was early in the morning, barely past dawn, but Tasuki had not slept much over the course of the night and as soon as the light had begun to stream through the trees, he had slipped out into the wilds out doors, squatting on the broken trunk of an old dead tree as he gazed down towards where his village had once stood. Even from this distance, he could see the blackened, charred corpse of the settlement, and he turned to send Kouji a grimace.

"It's not any prettier by the light of day. Worse, in fact." He said matter-of-factly. "People ain't gonna be able to go back there… it's wasted."

"So what do we do?" Kouji cocked his head. "Last night was emergency measures, I realise, but we can't have half a village population coursing all over our mountain. I know that we've kept them all pretty much out of headquarters up here, but even so — we can't keep this up. You must know that."

"I do." Tasuki nodded, getting to his feet. He pulled his tessen from his back, glancing at it, and then hitting it against the trunk of the tree in frustration.

"Damn it." He muttered. "The whole place, wiped out. Just like that."

"You're not thinking about Aidou's ravings, are you?" Kouji arched an eyebrow. "Talkin' like you should've been glued to the farmstead in case of danger, instead of living your own life?"

"No, I never listen to Aidou, so not at all." Tasuki shook his head. "But it just seems stupid, is all."

He frowned, pursing his lips.

"You know I can't stay here, now, at least until this is resolved." He added, and Kouji's eyes widened.

"So you're gonna take off and leave me to handle a village's population? Thanks, buddy, that's real nice of you!"

"Don't be like that." Tasuki ran his hands through his hair. "Listen. I ain't got a choice. You and the guys, you didn't get down from the mountain in time to see, but the fire wasn't caused by lightning or a stray tinder. It was set by a person. The village was attacked. By… by one of us."

"One of…?"

"One of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi." Tasuki looked grim, none of his

usual exhuberance in his expression. “At least, according to Chichiri, it was. Last night, Kouji, Chichiri and I defended the village against the former Emperor of Kounan, wielding a possessed sword and with the look of the devil in his eye.”

“Saihitei-sama?” Kouji’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “You are kidding me, right?”

“No, I wish I was.” Tasuki shook his head. “That’s why I have to go. Chichiri and I both. Because we have to find him, and whatever’s making him act like this — we have to stop it. I doubt anyone else could — if he still has his Suzaku power, he’s only gonna cause harm. Chichiri and I are stronger than other people. So it has to be us.”

Kouji swore, shaking his head slowly.

“I thought that all that Suzaku business was over.” He admitted. “That the Miaka girl went back to her own world. You came back here. Everythin’ was gonna settle down to normal — whatever that is for a bandit. Since Hakurou-sama died — no, since before that, since you came to the mountain, nothin’ has been completely secure on Reikaku-zan. And now this.”

“Are you suggestin’ that I cause trouble for Reikaku-zan?” Tasuki reacted, his grip on his tessen tightening as sparks flickered from the tip, and Kouji stared at him for a moment, shaking his head.

“Watch who you’re pointing that thing at.” He objected. “I’m your buddy, remember? Not some possessed dead warrior who goes round burning down villages for kicks. And of course not, you moron. I know that the things that have happened haven’t been your fault. But even so… even so…”

He paused, then,

“I do sometimes wonder which is more important to you.” He hazarded. “Hakurou-sama knew it too, when he was alive. That one day you’d be pulled away from Reikaku, because of Suzaku. And now it’s coming true. The things he said then… you’re not really Genrou, not all the time. At least, that’s how it seems to be. You’re Tasuki at least half of it. That’s all.”

Tasuki frowned for a moment, his eyes unusually dark. Then, he held out the tessen, dropping it with a clatter onto the stone-laden floor beneath his feet.

“I won’t make a choice between who I am.” He said softly. “If you want to fight about this, then the tessen is there. Come get it… if you think you can do a better job on Reikaku-zan than I can.”

Kouji's jaw dropped, as he registered the seriousness in his friend's clouded eyes. He frowned, getting to his feet and walking over towards his companion. Slowly he bent to pick up the tessen, glancing at it. Then, with a swift flick of his wrist, he brought the flat of it down hard against his companion's skull.

"Hey!" Tasuki exclaimed, his hand going to his head. "That hurt!"

"Well, it should, you idiot." Kouji said unsympathetically, holding out the tessen to his friend. "You're talking totally unlike yourself, and I don't like it. Whatever's in the air — whatever was buzzing through your Hotohori's body when he set fire to your village, it seems to have nested in your brain too, now. God knows there's enough room in your skull for anything to take up house. Stop freaking me out and take this, will you? You know I'll see to the villagers for you, if that's what you want. I'm not questioning your right to have the tessen. And I would never take it from you. So stop being a moron. Okay?"

Tasuki hesitated, then took the cold metal between his fingers, eying the older bandit ruefully.

"All right. I get it." He said frankly.

"Good. Then snap out of it." Kouji instructed. "Hakurou-kashira chose you to be his successor because of your spirit and your will. Right now you're lettin' him down on both counts. If you can let me whack you with your own weapon, you ain't firing on all cylinders. So stop agonisin'. Where the villagers are concerned, we'll divvy up our recent takings and split it between 'em, then send them on their way. They should be able to make their way then in some other village, an' the people round here aren't as snidey as some — they don't mind migration, because of the nature of the mountain. That should see them okay, at least for a while. We can't do more than that."

"I want my father to stay here, till his leg is healed." Tasuki said quietly. "He doesn't talk much, so you won't notice him. But I'm sure it's broken. And I guess that means Ma and Aidou will stay here, too. Sorry about that."

"Ookay." Kouji bit his lip, but nodded his head. "You're the boss."

"Whatever that means."

"What is really botherin' you, Genrou?" Kouji demanded. "The village? Your family? Anzu? Suzaku no Miko? What?"

"I don't know." Tasuki admitted, frustration in his eyes. "It's like you said — whatever was buzzin' round his Highness's head yesterday has transferred itself to me. I'll snap out of it. Don't worry. And I don't

want to take off from Reikaku-zan again so quickly. I just know I gotta. Chichiri thinks this is bigger than just one random occurance an' one fire. He's annoyingly right when it comes to karma, so I gotta believe him."

"I realise that." Kouji acknowledged. "I'm sorry I called you on it. You didn't choose to be Tasuki, an' I was the one who pushed you to reveal it to the world. So it's all right. We'll cope. As usual."

"Miaka ain't even here, and still the world is a mess." Tasuki let out his breath in a rush. "Stars disappearin' from the sky… Taikyoku-zan puttin' up some kind of barrier, an' now the former Emperor of Kounan attackin' mountain villages. Maybe Chichiri is right. Maybe the world is coming to an end."

He turned, offering his friend a grin.

"Chichiri an' me will fix it. Don't worry. And then we'll be back." He said firmly. "With Mitsukake, if we can find him, to see to Pa's leg."

"That sounds more like you." Kouji grinned lazily. "You'll probably find you need your little toy, too. It ain't like you to loose hold of it so easily… maybe the pressure's finally getting to ya, what do you think?"

"More likely it's something in the ether, you know."

Chichiri's voice came from overhead and as both bandits glanced up, they saw the monk in the branches of a tree, watching them from behind the security of his kitsune mask. He grinned, tikting his hat at them in apology.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I was following Tasuki's chi." He explained. "There's something muggy in the air today, and it's less easy for me to pick it up than usual."

"Get down here, will you? You're hurtin' my neck, staring up at you like that." Tasuki complained, and Chichiri nodded, leaping gracefully down to the ground and landing perfectly on his feet, slipping the *kasa* back onto his head.

"With pleasure." He agreed. "I don't think that branch was up to much more of my weight, anyhow."

"What do you mean, something muggy in the air?" Kouji looked wary. "Are you sayin' I'm right? That there is somethin' buzzing around the atmosphere since Genrou's village burnt down last night?"

"If you are, Kouji, it'll be a first for you, right?" Tasuki shot his

friend a wolfish grin, and Kouji jabbed him with his elbow, grimacing in the red-head's direction.

"Shut up, moron. You could let one go, just once, you know."

"Buzzing around the atmosphere is a good way of putting it, you know." Chichiri said thoughtfully, calmly ignoring the playful spatting between the two mountain men as he leant up against the trunk of his tree. "I suppose a fire of that nature's bound to bring everyone down some, though. So many people losing homes and all of that."

"Noone was killed, though. That's something at least." Tasuki returned his tessen to its strap on his back. "Right?"

"Yes. Thanks to our interference and the help of the Reikaku-zan rescue brigade." Chichiri's lips twitched into a smile, giving him a surreal appearance. "But it will take time to rebuild. My village was destroyed too, you know… true, by flood and not fire, but I understand what the villagers must be feeling. And Tasuki's family are involved, so I suppose…"

He frowned, shaking his head as if changing his mind in mid sentence.

"No. It's not just that." He decided, holding out his hand as if feeling for something on the wind. "There's something else. Something negative. I can't explain what it is, but whatever I'm sensing is what was blazing from Hotohori-sama last night. A sort of… emptiness. Hopelessness. Full of doubt… full of fear. I don't know how to define it, but it's been there in flashes on and off since we came to the mountain. Little things to begin with, but slowly the sense has been stronger. When we encountered his Highness last night, I suppose I saw it in it's raw, original form. I think this has something to do with us, Tasuki. The Suzaku Shichi Seishi. I know I touched on it before, but I think that the others have been dragged back to some form of life by whatever has damaged Taikyoku-zan. We can't get there, because that is, in effect, the root source of spiritual sagacity for this world. Not just Kounan, but all of the four Kingdoms. And if something's wrong there, well… it's going to have a knock on effect. Like when Tenkou was able to manipulate this world and the people and elements in it — I'm afraid this is something along the same lines."

"Another Tenkou?" Tasuki clenched his fists, and Chichiri shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think there's a demon." He said helplessly. "It's not that kind of feeling. It's just… what Kouji said. Something buzzing in the

atmosphere. Last night it affected you, Tasuki, because your village was targeted. It's still flickering a little in your aura today, which is why I had such a job pinpointing you at first. Whatever drove Hotohori-sama in the village last night, I don't know. What he was thinking or feeling, we've yet to find out. But that it was your village — I don't know, is it a coincidence? I really wonder about that."

"You're sayin' those people got burned out because of *me*?" Tasuki looked horrified. "Because that was *my* village? That's why?"

"No. Or not exactly." Chichiri pursed his lips. "Just that the Suzaku Seishi tend to be drawn to one another's life forces, when those forces are particularly strong. I don't know, Tasuki. Either last night was an attempt to weaken you, or some kind of cry for help. I can't work it out just yet. But either way, finding the others is important. Whatever's upsetting the balance, we need to try and rectify it however we can. If we have any powers left as warriors of Suzaku, we can't just stand back and let our friends run riot in the way Hotohori did last night. If he's been tainted by this aura, well, the others may have been too. I couldn't decide if he had a proper physical presence last night, but one thing I am sure of — he has *not* been reborn in the way Taiitsukun promised. And if he hasn't…"

"Nor have the others." Tasuki said darkly. "With you. Let's go."

"You should probably explain yourself to your family, where you're going and why." Kouji said ruefully. "I don't mind them stopping here, while you're gone, but if Aidou's going to whack anyone round the ear for it, it's going to be you. She's your sister — you tell her and your Ma too where you're takin' off to in such a hurry. I ain't doin' it. Playin' stand in kashira I can handle, but your family are somethin' else."

Chichiri chuckled, as Tasuki adopted a sheepish look. Slowly he nodded.

"Sure, if you're too scared to do it." He agreed evenly. "I'll go speak to them now. I should see how Pa is, anyway."

"He was sleeping, when I left, and your mother and sister were having some heated discussion over the best way to mind his wound." Chichiri reflected absently. "I don't know who won, in the end."

"Great." Tasuki slapped his forehead in resignation. "That makes me feel better, knowin' they're both breathin' fire before I even set foot in the room."

"Must be a genetic thing. They breathe it an' you shoot it. No

wonder you fired the tessen before you even knew the whole incantation." Kouji laughed, and Genrou cuffed him playfully across the back of the head.

"Idiot." He said bluntly. "For that, you're coming too."

"Nope, not me." Kouji shook his head. "I'm going to go explain to the guys why Kashira-sama is takin' off on them again… and then I have a bunch of homeless villagers to see to — Kashira's orders. See you later."

"If you ask me, I think he got the easier job." Tasuki reflected ruefully, as his friend loped off into the distance, whistling under his breath as he went. "I swear, I take more bruises from Aidou than I ever have livin in this place. And the worst part about it is — I can't hit a damn girl, so there's nothing I can do about it!"

"If you say things to her like you did last night, I'm not surprised." Chichiri observed dryly, as the two Seishi headed back towards the base proper. "If you'd learn tact, Tasuki-kun, you'd probably get less bruises. Didn't you learn that at all from travelling with Nuriko, at the very least?"

"Another girl with a wicked left hook." Tasuki grimaced. "It's no good, Chichiri. Where women are concerned, it's just safer to steer well clear. Even women who are secretly men in disguise."

"If you ask me, I think you're more afraid of your sister and your mother than you are of facing demons and putting out fires." Chichiri mused, sending his companion a sidelong glance. Tasuki snorted.

"You try living with them." He returned smartly. "See how long you last!"

"Aidou-san has always been very polite to me, and your mother too." Chichiri said innocently. "It really must be down to you and your lack of delicacy."

"Genrou?"

As they reached the building, Anzu was just leaving the annexe where Tasuki's father, mother and elder sister had been given makeshift accomodation the night before. She cast him a hesitant, pensive look, and Tasuki could see that in her hands she clutched a soiled rag. He frowned.

"You've been with my family."

"I was helping." Anzu defended herself. "Is that a bad thing? I nursed my sister, you know, when she was sick. And your father's leg

is broken. I was helping Aidou-san to bind the wound. I was going to see if I could find any herbs to help his pain, too."

"You know what herbs can do that?" Tasuki blinked, and Anzu shrugged.

"A little." She admitted, her cheeks pinkening at the surprise on his face. "Because of Karin's fever. She was ill on and off for a while, before she died. I learnt… things like that."

"For that matter, Nyan Nyan taught me a little, too, and so did Mitsukake, when I was helping him tend the war wounded." Chichiri added. "There are several plants around Reikaku-zan which would work as effective analgesics… it's a good idea, and I'm sure it will help."

Anzu dimpled, nodding her head.

"I hope so." She admitted. "He's been very brave about it, but it's obvious that the break is a bad one."

She frowned, pursing her lips as she eyed their expressions.

"You're going away from the mountain again, aren't you?" She asked softly. "To find the one who burnt the village."

"Yes." Tasuki nodded. "That's the plan, anyhow. So you listen, okay? Do what Kouji asks you to and keep your head down. He's gonna have enough to deal with without pandering to a girl's whims, so keep that in mind."

"I don't need to be told. I can take care of myself." Anzu tossed her head. Tasuki snorted.

"Just don't get in the way, huh?" Was all he said, however, moving past her and pushing open the door of the small hut-like building. At his entrance, the figure in the corner got to her feet, and Tasuki hesitated for a moment, as if gauging his sister's mood.

"So you did remember we were here then?" Aidou asked quietly.

"Don't start." Tasuki grimaced. "It's too early in the morning, and besides, all I came to say was that Chichiri and I are going to be leaving the mountain, to track down the one who flamed the village. It's a big deal, apparently, so you just stay here with Ma and Pa, don't kill any bandits and keep out of the way. Okay?"

"So you're just taking off, to go play the hero in the hills of Kounan?" Aidou asked sharply. "While Father is here, hurt?"

"Anzu can help with that. Apparently she knows something about

herbs, or whatever." Tasuki said simply. "And besides, Oneechan, this is a Seishi thing. It's Suzaku's business. It ain't just a random ride into the blue."

"Always escaping his responsibilities, that's my Shun'u." From the other side of the room, Tasuki's mother put in her bit, tut tutting under her breath. "Suzaku's business, as ever, waving your bit of metal around and yelling spells like that's the only way to fight a battle. You'll wind up getting yourself killed, if you're not careful."

"Mother…" Tasuki rubbed his temples. "For the last damn time, the tessen is not just a bit of metal, and I don't just… aw, what's the use? I'm going. Chichiri, we're out of here. Come on."

"I'm coming with you." Aidou's voice made him falter, and he swung back to face her, alarm in his bronzeish eyes.

"You?" He demanded. "What can you do, except get in the way and nag me till I go deaf? Aidou, this isn't a mission for girls. This is a man's fight and you're definitely not a man, even if you hit like one sometimes. You stay here, look after Pa. Leave it to me and to Chichiri. We can handle it."

"I said I was coming with you." Aidou moved purposefully towards the door of the chamber, and despite himself, Tasuki flinched backwards, as if anticipating her swinging fist. Instead, however, she stopped level with him, raising her gaze to meet his defiantly.

"Someone has to make sure you don't get yourself killed." She said calmly. "Mother will stay with Pa, and your little woman is here, if she's so good at running around at everyone's beck and call. She can see to it, too. But I'm not staying here, on a mountain surrounded by boys who think they're men. You shouldn't even want to leave your sister in a place like this, anyway, not with you taking off. You're still shirking your responsibilities, and I've decided. I'm coming."

"It might be dangerous, Aidou-san." Chichiri eyed her doubtfully. "I'm sure Tasuki wouldn't want to see you get hurt."

"A battle-axe like her would probably send any enemies we meet screaming for the hills." Tasuki muttered, and Aidou glared at him, putting her hands on her hips.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, Oneesama." Tasuki pulled a face. "Look, stop being a pain, will you? Stay here. I told you last night, none of the men are going to touch you. And I really don't need you. You'll just slow us down, and…"

“I told you. I’m coming.” This time Aidou’s hand did sweep across her brother’s head, and Tasuki only just managed to duck the blow in time. “So stop whining like a baby and let’s get a move on. You forget that it was my village that burnt last night too, you know. And it might be nice, for a change, to see if my little brother can actually do something properly.”

With that she pushed past him, heading out into the sunlight and leaving her younger brother gaping after her.

“You know, Tasuki, I think I’ve just worked out why it is you’re so slow on the uptake sometimes.” Chichiri reflected absently, amusement in his expression.

“Huh?” Tasuki stared at him, non-plussed.

“Aidou-san seems quite happy to relieve you of un-used braincells… that’s all.”

“She’s a damn menace.” Tasuki grimaced. “If you’re looking for a cause of local bad karma, Chichiri, I think she’s a pretty good candidate.”

“Is she really going to come with us, do you think?”

“Did you not hear her?” Tasuki gritted his teeth. “She’s coming. That’s Aidou when you can’t shake her. Dammit, and I thought this trip was gonna be tricky enough without that. But I guess we’re stuck with her… at least until she decides she’s had enough and decides to high tail it back.”

He sighed, gazing ruefully down at his hands.

“Let’s go, then.” He said resignedly. “Before she comes back and brains me for wasting time!”

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

"It's almost an adventure."

Tamatama gazed out of the window of the carriage, casting a thoughtful gaze across the moving landscape as he did so. "Two pretty young girls on a trip to the capital — where adventures await."

"Stop it." Nuriko instructed, although a faint smile brushed his lips at his companion's light humour. "That's not why we're going to Eiyou. Although to be honest, I'm glad I'm not going alone."

He shivered, pulling his wrap more tightly around him as the carriage wheel juddered over a stone. "It's disorientating and strange, when you don't remember."

"Even with your hair that short, Kourin, you're still a pretty catch." Tamatama reflected, turning to smile at his friend. "I suppose that a face like yours can always carry you, even if you haven't taken very good care of yourself since the last time we met. A change of clothing and a little make-up and you look as charming as ever — don't say I never take care of you, my friend. With your background in the textile trade, you must be able to appreciate fine fabric when you see it."

"I do feel better, now we've left that place." Nuriko admitted, glancing down at himself as he did so. "There was something… soothing about dressing this way, too. Like I hadn't done it for a while, but it still felt natural to do. Like it ran more deeply inside of me somehow — although I don't really understand how."

"None of us really do." Tamatama said philosophically. "Those like you and me, we're enigmas even to ourselves. Which is why we get to stick together, right?"

He winked, and Nuriko nodded.

"I suppose we do."

"Then why the long face, huh? We're doing what you wanted — right?"

"I'm a little afraid to go to Eiyou." Nuriko pursed his lips. "I don't know what I'll find there. You said my family were merchant folk, in the capital's textile district. But I can't… I don't remember. None of

that is coming back to me at the moment. All I can see is that girl… Byakuren… and what happened in the snow in Yukigase. Or maybe in Hokkan. The two are a blur… I can't distinguish them apart."

"Which is no doubt why you're so confused." Tamatama said wisely. "I have to admit, Kourin, it upsets me to see you out of sorts. You're really not the girl I remember you as — you seemed to have so much confidence then, even though you'd experienced sorrow and disaster in your life before we met."

"Right now I don't really remember that." Nuriko looked pensive. "Just a hole inside of myself that I can't quite fill. That's all."

Tamatama pursed his rouged lips, but said nothing, and they travelled in silence for a moment. Then Nuriko frowned.

"Byakuren… had a brother." He said slowly. "Tenbun. I remember… wasn't he a friend of yours? Did he die too, when the demon came?"

"No." Tamatama shook his head. "But he left Yukigase a short while after you did. He lost both his mother and his sister that night, and though he tried to adjust… it was difficult."

He sighed contemplatively.

"What we do for the ones we love." He added, his tones resigned. "I didn't want him to go, but in the end, I thought it was better if I helped him leave. His family were from the capital originally, and so he decided to go back there, and see if he could find work. Escape everything that had happened… or no, if I'm honest, I think maybe he came to look for you."

"For me?" Nuriko looked startled, and Tamatama grinned.

"I told you you had a pretty face, Kourin." He bantered. "And I never could quite bring myself to tell him who you really were. Although it broke my heart knowing that he felt like he did about you — I thought it would be too cruel, so soon after losing Byakuren. He wanted to marry you, you know…"

"He'd have gotten a shock." Nuriko said acerbically, and Tamatama burst out laughing, slapping his knee in appreciation.

"Now that sounds much more like my Kourin-chan." He said playfully. "You are starting to come back to me, after all. Maybe it's the travel — I guess the fresh air is doing you good."

"Or the friendly company." Nuriko acknowledged. "You've been kind to me even though I've not been anything but trouble for you

since I arrived in Yukigase. I appreciate that. Although I do wonder if maybe you're going to Eiyou to find this brother of Byakuren's as much as you are to help me."

"Well, I guess I might be." Tamatama admitted. "But no, really, I'm coming because I don't think you should be left alone right now, Kourin. As Nuriko, you have a lot of strength in that svelte body of yours — and so far you've not seemed to be able to control it too well. I'm pretty strong, considering what a delicate wraith I am. I thought that at least, if I was with you, maybe I could act as damage limitation. It took a lot to hold you in that room, back at the house — but I managed it. So I think that it's better this way. You need an escort, and well, pretty ladies should never travel alone, anyway."

"My strength." Nuriko glanced at his hands. "When you say that, I feel like there's something… I should remember. Something I should know. Maybe it is how to control it, or how it really works inside of me."

He groaned, shaking his head.

"It's so damn frustrating." He muttered. "I don't know who I am or anything. And if you didn't know as much about me as you seem to, I wouldn't remember anything at all."

"Maybe that's why you came to Yukigase, then." Tamatama suggested. "If I'm right, and you were hurt in Hokkan, it's not so very great a stretch to think that you did. Familiar territory in the north of Kounan, after all. You're a southern girl, really. You grew up in Eiyou — at least, I imagine that you did. That's nine or ten days travel at worst from the Hokkan border — I guess you came to the one part of the north country to which you felt you had a connection. At least, that would make sense to me."

"A place where a girl died because of me? Some connection."

"Byakuren's death wasn't your fault, you ninny." Tamatama scolded. "Stop it with that mindset, will you? You frown too much and you'll give yourself wrinkles — and that would be a crime, with a face like yours."

Despite himself, Nuriko smiled feebly at this.

"Perhaps you're right." He said pensively. "Till I get to Eiyou, though, and find this Chou family you talked about, I won't really know for sure. If I am Chou Ryuuen, then I need to find out what pieces of the jigsaw I'm missing. You say I'm Suzaku's Nuriko, and I can't dispute it — I remember the fight in the snow against Ashitare,

and defending… defending the Miko, though it's fleeting as a dream. But it's all disjointed and wrong in my memory, like it never really happened at all. Maybe when I'm on home territory, I'll understand better."

"That's more of the spirit." Tamatama said comfortably. "And like I said, it's an adventure."

"I wonder where we are." Nuriko said pensively. "I must have come this way before, the first time I came to Yukigase. But I don't have any memory of it at all."

"It's some days distance to the capital." Tamatama responded. "Maybe you'll see some more familiar landmarks as we go further south. This is all new to me, anyway. But it is a little exciting."

He shifted his skirts more comfortably, then grinned.

"If a beauty such as you can cross-dress openly in the streets of Eiyou, then it must be a city worth my visiting." He added speculatively. "Father wasn't sure I should travel so far away from home, but you know, I've always heard stories about the capital. It's time I saw for myself what it has to offer."

"You're enjoying this way more than you should be." Nuriko reflected, and Tamatama looked rueful.

"Yukigase is a small place, and people aren't always kind." He said frankly. "I've learnt not to let it bother me, but since you went back home, and Tenbun left… well, it's isolating, in a sense, losing friends like that. That's all. Your coming to me was a sign, I think. A sign that it's time to branch out. After all, I'm not going to marry a village woman and settle down like father would secretly like me to do, am I? There can't be any harm in me travelling a little bit, surely?"

"You never have any doubts about it, then? About being who you are?"

"Do you?"

"Right now, yes. About everything." Nuriko groaned, rubbing his temples. Tamatama looked serious, resting a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"That's what I mean, when I say you're not like Kourin at the moment." He said frankly. "This kind of indecisiveness — it really isn't like you at all."

"I wish you'd stop saying that." Nuriko muttered. "Every time you do I feel like I'm letting someone down. And the trouble is, I don't

even know who that someone is. It's driving me crazy, trying to remember — but the more I try, the more dread and sadness I feel. So then I don't know if I want to remember, after all. It's a vicious circle and it isn't helping me feel any better about myself."

"Sorry." Tamatama looked contrite. "Perhaps it is a little bit tactless."

He sighed, stretching his meaty arms as he did so.

"As for your question, I think everyone has doubts." He said briskly. "But mine these days usually involve choosing between pink silk and black. No, Kourin, I don't think that I do. I've been this kind of Tamatama long enough to know it's who I am."

He sent his friend a sidelong glance.

"But you're not entirely sure that you're a girl, are you?" He asked curiously. "Even when I knew you before, you were indecisive as to whether you liked men or women, I remember that. You tried to distinguish it from what I do, by saying it was your sister's spirit inside you, a way for you to be together. Perhaps I was wrong, when I said it wasn't like you to be unsure. Maybe I've got a jaded memory — perhaps you are more like the girl I remember than I thought."

Nuriko looked thoughtful for a moment.

"When you said that, a man's face came into my mind." He admitted. "A… a beautiful face. Kind and gentle, and… and lonely. Someone… someone dear to me, I think. Someone… I loved once. As a woman."

"And yet you're still not sure?"

"I…" Nuriko frowned. "I guess I don't remember enough about my life to answer that."

"So wait, you're telling me you had a drop dead gorgeous man somewhere in your circle, and yet, you weren't sure?" Tamatama's eyes widened. "You're sicker than I thought."

"No, just confused." Nuriko shrugged. "But… I can't remember his name, or who he was to me. I just feel… that I loved him. And that I would have done anything for him, once upon a time. That's all."

He sighed, folding his hands in his lap.

"Bits and pieces." He said resignedly. "Nothing makes any coherent sense, so there's not much point in trying."

"Looks like we're stopping." Tamatama glanced out of the window

again, nodding his head. “I suppose we’ve reached our next stopping point. I’m hungry, and I don’t know about you, but we should get something to eat and drink before we try and find someone who can take us further south. It’s a long trip, after all — but this looks like a big enough place to be finding food.”

“I’m not really hungry, but I guess I could use a break.” Nuriko nodded, as Tamatama wrenched open the door, stepping down heavily before turning and offering his hand to his companion in a mock-chivalrous way. Nuriko grimaced at him, clambering down nimbly and gazing around him at the bustling centre of the town. It wasn’t a huge city, not like the pictures that flitted like ghosts in and out of his muddled mind. But it was busy and swarming with people, and something in the life of the place seemed to cheer his spirits.

“I think this is a nice place to stop.” He reflected. “All right. We’ll eat and then we’ll move on.”

“I think I see a place up ahead.” Tamatama gestured, as they headed up the main street, Tamatama seemingly oblivious to the stares he received as he strode easily along the cobbles. “I have some money, so you shouldn’t worry about that… I brought plenty of coin with me, and you should let me treat you — after all, you’re not well right now, and you need to be properly looked after.”

“It’s all right. I don’t think I need to eat, anyway.” Nuriko shrugged his shoulders as he approached the tavern his friend had indicated. “But I’ll keep you company, with pleasure.”

“You should eat, you know. Even with a figure like yours, food is necessary to live.”

“Maybe.” Nuriko said absently. “I’ll eat at the next stop then, I suppose. I’m not really up to it now, but thank you, anyhow.”

“Well, suit yourself. I could eat a horse.” Tamatama shrugged, putting his hand on the door. “Hey, are we going in?” As his friend paused, gazing up the street the way they had come.

“Kourin?”

“That girl…” Nuriko’s brows creased and he took a step or two back towards the centre of town, a strange expression flickering in his eyes.

“Girl? What girl?” Tamatama frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Nuriko raised his hand, gesturing to a young girl of eight or nine

who was playing with a ball not far from a busy market stall. Tamatama's confusion grew.

"A girl with a ball — what about her?"

"I don't know." Nuriko admitted. "I feel like I know her. That's all. Would you mind waiting for me? I'm going to go ask her her name."

"Kourin, you can't just go speaking to strange kids, people will think you're up to something." Tamatama protested, but Nuriko was not listening, already half way back up the street. Tamatama sighed, turning his back on the tavern in resignation as he followed his friend, shaking his head slowly as he did so.

As Nuriko approached, the small girl stopped her game, clutching her ball to her chest as she eyed him with big, startled eyes. Nuriko offered her a smile.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your game." He said gently. "I just wondered if we'd met before. You remind me… of something… I just… will you tell me your name?"

"S… Shian." The girl looked bewildered. "Hei Shian. Have you come to buy something from Mother's stall?"

"Shian, stop bothering that lady and come do something productive." A woman's voice rang out, and Shian started, dropping her ball as she turned towards the speaker. A harried woman stood there, hands on hips, and Nuriko realised that she was Shian's mother, the owner of the market stall. He bowed his head quickly in her direction.

"I'm sorry, it was my fault. I was asking your daughter… for directions." He said lightly. "I'm sorry to have troubled you both, when I know you must be busy."

"It's quite all right. You're a traveller here? Then you must be hungry." The woman offered a tired smile. "We have a lot to offer, you know — please feel free to take a look at our wares."

"I'm afraid I don't have any money. I'm reliant on my friend's goodwill on this trip." Nuriko said apologetically.

"My ball!" Shian let out an exclamation at that point, turning as she saw the small blue ball rolling out into the centre of the road. "Mother, I have to get my ball!"

"Leave the ball, Shian — it's not important. We'll get it later." The mother scolded, but Shian shook her head.

“Aniki gave me that before he went to fight for the Emperor.” She said stubbornly. “It’s Aniki’s ball — I won’t let it go!”

Before either the mother or Nuriko could stop her she had darted out into the road in the direction the ball had gone.

“Shian, get back here!” Her mother exclaimed, but her words fell on deaf ears and as Nuriko watched, cold dread settled in his heart. Images flashed and flickered across his senses and he bit his lip, trying to swallow the sudden sense of fear that welled up inside of him.

“Kourin.” He whispered, and before he knew what he was doing he had struck out after her, just as a horse and rider came around the blind bend ahead, galloping at speed with the man on it’s back clearly not in full control of his steed. Nuriko’s heart seemed to pound in his chest as he grabbed for the girl roughly, pulling her up in his arms as the animal bore down on them. Tamatama’s voice screamed something, but it was too distant for Nuriko to make out. Knowing that the horse was too close to miss them completely, he made up his mind, covering Shian with his own body as he waited for the impact of the animal’s hooves.

The rider yelled, and there was the sound of a whinny and a scraping of cobbles as the beast was finally brought to a stop. Nuriko felt the dig of front hooves against his body, but somehow he was numb to the pain as in his grasp, a little girl began to cry softly.

“Kourin! Kourin, what the hell were you thinking?” Tamatama darted forwards to haul his friend up, and Nuriko struggled to his feet, setting the dishevilled, frightened Shian down on the ground as tears glittered in his own eyes. As soon as the girl was free, she pulled away from her rescuer, running for her mother, who had stood staring in horror and dismay at the tragedy that had almost unfolded in front of them.

“You saved her life.” Tamatama brushed his friend’s clothing down. “But you could have been killed — you stupid girl, what were you thinking of?”

“Kourin.” Nuriko said unsteadily. “I was thinking… of Kourin.”

He bent to pick up the forgotten ball, glancing at it.

“I must give this back to her.” He said softly. “I’m all right, Tamatama. I don’t bleed, remember? So I can’t be hurt.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.” Tamatama muttered, but Nuriko paid him no attention, approaching the mother and child and holding out the ball.

“This is yours.” He said quietly.

Shian merely stared at him with frightened eyes, and her mother sighed, taking the ball slowly from his grip.

“I’m sorry. And grateful.” She said quietly. “My daughter is all I have… and you… you could have been killed, but you rescued her anyway. I have no way to thank you for that.”

She glanced at the ball, then,

“Her brother gave it to her as a keepsake, before he went to fight for Sahitei-sama in the war with Kutou.” She added unsteadily. “He didn’t come home, and Shian — she believes he lives inside of it. That she can keep him, if she thinks of him as being inside the ball.”

Nuriko’s eyes widened, and tears sprinkled his own cheeks.

“I understand.” He whispered. “I lost my sister, too.”

He glanced at Shian, touching her gently on the head.

“That’s who you reminded me of.” He murmured, more to himself than to her. “Kourin.”

“There must be something I can do, to show my gratitude? Anything at all?” The mother asked, and Nuriko shook his head.

“To help her… and her brother. That was enough.” He said faintly.

“Kourin?” Tamatama approached at this juncture. “Are you sure you’re all right? The hooves came down on you pretty hard — shouldn’t I take a look at you, to make sure you’ve not hurt yourself?”

“told you, I didn’t feel pain when they struck me. Not there, at least.” Nuriko shook his head. “I’m fine, Tamatama. Go ahead to the tavern. Get something to eat. I… I’m going to take a walk, I think, and clear my head.”

“No way are you going anywhere on your own.” Tamatama shook his head adamantly, grabbing his companion by the arm and forcibly leading him back towards the tavern. “After that little adventure you can’t pretend you don’t need to reboost your energy with something warm to eat, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“I forgot about her.” Nuriko said sadly. “But when I saw Shian… it was like… she was there again. How could I have forgotten? Of all people — how could I have forgotten her?”

“You’ve forgotten a lot of things of late. Don’t worry so much about one particular example.” Tamatama told him quietly. “Just come with

me and sit down, okay? You've got a strange, not quite there look about you at the moment, and I'm not sure you're really okay after that little escapade. It was damn brave, but seriously, you could have both been trampled to death."

"Perhaps that would have been better." Nuriko murmured, and Tamatama frowned, pausing and giving his companion a good shake.

"No, you are not going to talk like that." He said firmly. "Do you understand? No matter how confused you're feeling. I won't allow it."

Nuriko closed his eyes, as images of another day in another busy street flooded over his senses. The horse's whinny, the crack of hooves against bone, and then his sister's body, lying dead and broken in his arms as he struggled to wake her. As the sensation overwhelmed him, he pushed his companion aside, almost causing the other man to fall headlong as he fled through the streets and houses, not caring where he was going, just as long as it was away from the memories that had stirred so cruelly inside of him. Tamatama called him back, but he took no notice, tears blinding his sight as he ran.

"Kourin." He whispered. "How could I forget you! Of all things… how could I forget!?"

"You're a kind girl, Anzu-san."

As Anzu set the remainder of her herbal brew down beside the bedside of Tasuki's sleeping father, she turned, offering his mother a shy smile as she shrugged her shoulders.

"I thought I could be helpful, that's all." She said self-consciously. "I can't do anything to heal the leg — but I do remember how to help ease pain, at least. And this should last for a few more days, too — I'm sure Genrou will be back by then, with his friend the healer if he can be."

"You're fond of my son, aren't you?" The older woman looked curious, and Anzu flushed red, nodding.

"I am." She admitted. "But I… don't know that he thinks the same about me."

"Well, he hasn't really grown up yet… although I'm starting to think that men never do." The older woman said sagely. "Still, if he had a young woman like you to take care of him, I'd worry less about his reckless attitude. Taking off like he has, that's just another indication of it — never staying in one place long enough to be counted. At least this time Aidou is with him — although I worry

about that, too. Even though we agreed that we shouldn't let him out of our sight — it's an undertaking, watching over my Shun'u."

"You and Aidou-san planned for her to go with Genrou?" Anzu paused, a startled expression crossing her face. "Even though it's dangerous?"

"Aidou can take care of herself. She's a sturdy woman with a good head on her shoulders, and she'll be all right." The other said with a smile. "I think it more likely Shun'u will come back in one piece if he has his sister's watchful eye on him. Knowing him, he'll charge into some hell for leather revenge battle to avenge his village's fire — and I know what happens to these Suzaku people. It's better to be safe… Aidou won't let him do anything stupid. She's always had a stronger rein over his actions than any of her sisters."

"Genrou's mentioned his sisters in passing, but I don't know much about your family." Anzu admitted. "He's the youngest, isn't he? And your other daughters are all married?"

"Yes." Tasuki's mother shifted her considerable bulk, indicating for Anzu to sit beside her, and after a moment of hesitation, Anzu did as she was bidden. "My middle three children are all settled with husbands, starting families of their own. That makes a mother happy — to see her children so responsibly settled."

"Aidou-san… said she was too old to find a husband now." Anzu remembered, a shadow touching her face. "So she stays on the farm, and helps you."

"Yes." A shadow crossed the other woman's face. "It's sad for her, in a sense. She did have… well, there was a time when we thought Aidou might have a settled future, too. But it wasn't to be. Wartime is such a cruel blow for families, Anzu-san… the young man in question died fighting for Kounan against Kutou. She's never spoken of it, or even really allowed it to affect her in any major way. But I'm sure that it affected her… I think it's more a case that she doesn't want to try again, now… it's our gain, in a way, but my heart does ache for her from time to time."

"I didn't realise." Anzu's eyes softened. "But if that's the case, I understand something a little better now. Something she said to me about people who fight. I won't say anything to her about it — but I'm glad to understand Genrou's sister a little better."

She frowned, eying the older woman keenly.

"But now the farm has been destroyed… what will you do? Where

will you all go?”

“Well, obviously we can’t rely on Shun’u to provide the answer to that, as a son should.” The older woman sighed, shaking her head. “No doubt we’ll go to one of the girls. It depends on how much damage the farm has sustained, and whether or not my husband’s leg heals properly… but we’re getting older, anyhow. The farm should have passed to Shun’u’s care by now — he should at least have learnt how to run it and keep things in hand. But… well, my son…”

She frowned, pursing her lips.

“We tried so hard to have a son, you know.” She reflected matter-of-factly. “It took us enough attempts, but when Shun’u was born, it was like the heavens answered our prayers. Don’t get me wrong — I love my daughters dearly, and I wouldn’t forsake any one of them. But we wanted to be able to pass the farm to a boy, just as my husband’s father passed it to his only son. It’s the way of things, I suppose. And when we finally had Shun’u, it seemed like it was all going to go to plan. A young man to protect his sisters and keep the farm in safe hands.”

She sighed gustily, shaking her head.

“And then when he was three years old… that mark appeared.” She said heavily. “At first we didn’t know what to make of it… it was so faint it seemed like maybe it was a birthmark or a rash — but it only appeared when he was excited or active. As he grew, we realised what it was. Suzaku’s mark. One of the chosen. And when I knew that, I wept — for sure, a whole night, I wept. Because I know the legend of Suzaku as surely as any citizen of Kounan does. I knew what it would mean.”

“Weren’t you proud though? That Suzaku had chosen your son to do his bidding?” Anzu was surprised. Her companion shrugged.

“I had only one son.” She said softly. “And I was afraid to lose him. Suzaku’s legend says that the chosen ones — the Seven Stars of Suzaku — will fight and die in defence of the Priestess of Suzaku. That their power will be drawn on to summon the beast God and protect Kounan. In short — my son was a sacrifice. His life, in exchange for those of the Kounan people.”

“I see.” Anzu looked sober at this. “That makes sense, I suppose. Even though it’s an honour, you must’ve felt — why us? Why our family?”

“Precisely.” The older woman nodded. “You see, I knew you were a

good kind of girl, Anzu-san. You strike me as intelligent, and you have a gentle touch about you, too. My son would do well to wake up to it… if he had you to take care of him, I'm sure he'd be quite all right."

"I… I don't know." Anzu flushed uncomfortably. "He… doesn't like women very much."

"Well, we've been hard on him. All of us, always." Tasuki's mother smiled, a rueful look in her eyes. "Because we were afraid for him. And even now, when Suzaku's shadow no longer hangs in the sky over Kounan — I wait for the day someone brings me that news. The news every mother dreads — that her son has given his life in defence of his country. It's a selfish thought, I know. But he *is* my only son, Anzu-san. That's why Aidou went with him. She knows how I feel — it's how we all feel. Shun'u is a reckless, mindless fool of a boy on occasion… and he seems blissfully unaware of the dangers that everyone else sees clearly. How he's made it to nineteen summers, I don't know. But I know that he lost many friends, doing Suzaku's bidding. And I wait… I wait for the hammer to fall on my son too. That even though he's survived this far… so long as those wings burn on his arm, I know he's subject to the God's will. And that he can still be sacrificed for Kounan."

Anzu was silent for a moment, touched by her companion's simple, honest confession.

"I understand." She said at length. "I… have no family of my own, Kou-san. My parents died a long time ago, and my sister, who I was closest to, passed away just a short time ago. I came here because I wanted to re-establish my friendship with Genrou — we knew each other two years ago, and I was sure that coming back to Kounan was the right thing to do. But sometimes I realise how little I know about him. About you. About everything, really. It makes me feel foolish — I think I love him, but then, so do many other people. Even if he doesn't know it."

Her companion's face broke into a wide smile.

"You have been good to my husband and I, since we arrived here, and I've appreciated that." She said gently. "I think that proves you have a good heart. And so does my son — deep beneath all the belligerence and stupidity. Please don't give up. Men are children for a lot longer than we girls, and they don't always know what they need or what they want. Shun'u is a worst case example — but if he's done something to cause you to love him, please, don't give up on him just yet."

“Oh, I haven’t.” Anzu grinned. “I’m more stubborn than that, Kou-san. Trust me.”

“Anzu-san?”

A voice from the doorway startled them both, and Anzu glanced up to see one of the other bandits standing there, offering her a smile. “Anzu-san, Kouji-aniki wants to see you.”

“Kouji does?” Anzu looked startled, nodding as she got to her feet. “All right. I… I’m coming. I’m sorry, Kou-san — Genrou told me before he left that I was to do what Kouji wanted, and it might be that he needs my help too.”

“Then go.” Tasuki’s mother assured her. “There’s nothing more you can do here, anyway. Thank you for soothing a farmer’s pain, my girl, but more, thank you for hearing an old woman’s words, too. I confess, I miss my daughter when she’s absent… I hope I’ve not imposed on you.”

“It’s no bother at all.” Anzu assured her with a laugh. “It’s a pleasure for me to meet Genrou’s family.”

She bowed her head, then withdrew from the chamber, casting the bandit a questioning glance.

“What did Kouji want?” She asked curiously. “I thought he was still busy with settling the villagers, as Genrou told him to. He said I should stay and try and help Genrou’s family, if I could.”

“I don’t question Aniki.” The other man said brusquely, gesturing for her to follow him and Anzu shrugged, doing as she was bidden. The bandit loped along in front of her, a slight limp giving away previous battle wounds, and as she glanced at him, Anzu tried to remember his name.

“Bouka, I think.” She reflected, narrowing her gaze as she considered. “But really, I haven’t mixed as much with the others here as I should. I mean, if I want to stay… I’ve spent most of my time with Kouji or Reirei or with Genrou and Chichiri, when they were here. I should make more of an effort to get to know Genrou’s buddies, shouldn’t I? I can’t be one of them if I don’t. I have to prove myself as much as any of the others, after all.”

“Hey, space cadet, are you coming?”

The bandit had stopped up ahead beside a doorway, pushing back the door as he gestured for her to enter. Anzu blushed, embarrassed by her inattention and she nodded, quickening her pace and stepping

into the room, glancing around her for the gang's deputy leader. He was nowhere in evidence, however, and as she turned to ask whether her escort had made a mistake, she heard the click of the door, raising alarmed brown eyes to meet amused hazel ones.

"Where's Kouji?" She demanded. "I thought you said he sent for me."

"Well, I guess that was a little white lie." The bandit, whose name *was* Bouka, she remembered now, offered her a slight smile, his gaze flickering over her as he spoke. "See, actually, I wanted to have a little word with you. But you're like, priveleged goods in this place. You only come running when Aniki or Kashira calls you — and I wanted to find something out from you myself. Oh, she'll never listen to a summons from just one of the guys, not that girl, I thought to myself. So I figured, tell her Aniki sent for her. That'd do it. Then she'd come."

Anzu frowned, folding her arms across her chest.

"You could have just asked me. You make me sound stuck up, and I'm not." She objected. "There's no need to spirit me away like this — if you have something to say, say it. Don't use Kouji as an excuse."

"See, you even call Aniki Kouji." Bouka's eyes narrowed, giving him a sinister look as for the first time Anzu properly registered the deep scar that ran across his brow. "If I did that, he'd make sure I regretted it. Noone calls Aniki Kouji, except Kashira. And noone calls Kashira Genrou, 'cept Aniki. Then… you come into the picture… and you talk to them both like old friends. Like you don't understand what a bandit's world is like."

"Kouji doesn't mind, and nor does Genrou." Anzu snapped back. "What's your point?"

"Well, we all thought, to begin with, it was because you were the Kashira's woman." Bouka eyed her speculatively. "But you ain't, are you? He doesn't seem to care if you're there or not — in fact, he didn't even know who you were, the night he came back to the mountain."

"I'd changed in two years. That's all." Anzu flushed. "And I've never said that I was his woman."

"No, but you sure act like you want to be." Bouka observed.

"That's not exactly any of your business."

"So you *do* think you're better than the rest of us." Bouka smirked. "But then, I heard a rumour, you want to be a bandit. Just like Aniki. Just like Kashira. You think that you can match up to them — be one

of us, even lead over us? I wasn't here when you were before, Anzu, but I've heard the stories. The little girl who tried to take over Reikaku-zan with a demon's power and some holy trinket. And none of us are going to let you do that. Kashira was chosen by the last boss, that's the way it is in a bandit's hierarchy. And you can't think that, by poisoning his mind, you'll be able to take over Reikaku-zan again. Kashira don't like women — *any* women. So you might as well give up now."

"I don't want to be Kashira." Anzu's eyes opened wide with shock. "Two years ago… that was a whole other matter, and it's long behind us now. It wasn't as clear cut as you think, and I would never do anything to hurt Genrou! I love him — why would I want to harm him?"

"Ah, she loves him." Bouka laughed, and with a jolt of alarm, Anzu registered the fact that her companion now held a short bladed dagger loosely in his right hand. "That's cute. Pity it's as I said — Kashira don't like women. And he sure ain't going to allow one to become a bandit. But it's all right, Anzu. We can still find a use for you. After all, you're mighty pretty. And if you ain't Kashira's woman, you're fair game."

"Let me out of here!" Anzu backed up against the wall, fear flickering in her eyes as for the first time she read the bandit's true intentions. "Let me go — G… Genrou will kill you, if he finds out what you're doing!"

"He won't care." Bouka shrugged. "You're just a woman, that's all. Some girl — he's far too busy doing the God's work, and seein' to proper Reikaku-zan stuff. He doesn't have the time of day for you, whatever you think about it. He's a bandit, not some shining knight on horseback. And you're in way over your head."

He approached her, grabbing her arm with calloused fingers as he tightened his grip around her wrist.

"Be good and don't scream, and I won't slit you throat." He whispered, as he pulled her towards him. "If you play nicely, I'm sure we'll find a reason for you to stay here… if you get my drift."

"Let go of me!" Anzu exclaimed, pushing against him with all her might, as she attempted to twist her body away from him, but despite his lean physique, Bouka was stronger than he appeared and he merely grabbed her more firmly, shoving her against the wall as he reached out a finger to touch her cheek.

"Aw. Don't cry." He said softly. "It won't hurt. Much."

Anzu swallowed hard, hating herself for being so weak as to show tears.

“I’m not crying. I’m angry.” She choked out, struggling to kick herself free, but Bouka’s eyes merely glinted with amusement, his hands dropping from her face down towards her throat and then further as he slid his fingers beneath the ties of her gown.

“You’re a virgin, aren’t you.” He observed, as she flinched away from him. “Which just goes to show, you really *aren’t* Kashira’s woman.”

“One more move, Bouka, and I’ll be skewerin’ you for Genrou myself.”

A fresh voice from the doorway made the bandit freeze, and Anzu wriggled out of his grasp, relief flooding her heart as she registered the presence of Kouji in the doorway. In his hand he held his sword, his expression one of decided unamusement, and at the sight of him, Bouka took a step back.

“Anzu, get out of there. Now.” Kouji spoke in low tones, and too shell-shocked to do anything else, Anzu scuttled out of the room, ducking behind the door as she watched the bandit’s temporary leader advance on the unfortunate Bouka.

“Explain.” Kouji’s voice was even and calm, but the tension in his body told Anzu that he was angrier than she had ever seen him before.

“She’s just a woman, Aniki.” Bouka muttered. Kouji pursed his lips, glancing at his sword, then back at his companion.

“She’s not to be touched. Not by you, or by anyone.” He said quietly. “I thought you understood that — Anzu has my protection. She has Genrou’s protection. She’s not some town prostitute you can lay your grubby, greedy fingers on. Do you understand me? You do not touch her.”

“She’s not Kashira’s woman.” Bouka’s eyes blazed with momentary defiance. “You led us to believe that she was, but she isn’t. She’s just some woman skulking around here thinking she owns the place. We all know the story of how she came to be here before… and she’s not Kashira’s, or yours. So why do you care so much? It’s not like she’s anyone special. She’s just another girl!”

Kouji’s eyes narrowed, and despite himself, Bouka flinched back.

“You have your standards. I have mine.” The stand in leader said

eventually, lowering his sword. “But while I’m deputising for Genrou, we’ll go by my rules. And if you don’t, I’m not kidding about the skewering.”

He frowned.

“Anzu may not be Genrou’s woman, as you put it, but she is his friend.” He added. “And on those terms, you should be glad it’s my sword and not his tessen you’re staring down. You really don’t know Genrou, if you think he’d stand for this — against Anzu, against his sister, against any woman in this place. And he’s not as forgiving as I am. So keep it in mind. If you — or anyone — lays a finger on Anzu again… you *will* regret it.”

He slid his sword back into the loop on his belt, then.

“Get out of my sight.” He said coldly. “And make sure any others who’ve been thinking along the same lines stop thinking along them. Because I *will* run my sword through the next person who tries to rape a woman on my shift.”

Bouka’s defiance crumbled away, and he sidled out of the room, casting Anzu a dark look before disappearing down the hallway. Anzu sighed, leaning up against the wall as her legs felt giddy beneath her.

“Thank you.” She murmured. “I… I couldn’t fight him off. He was so strong.”

“You should be more clever, too. Wisen up.” Kouji offered her a frown. “I don’t believe in using women, but this place — this is a bandit hideout. There are men much rougher in their views than Genrou or I. We can’t protect you all the time, you know… you shouldn’t be naive.”

“He said you wanted to speak to me. I thought he’d brought a message — how was I to know?”

“If you want to stay here, you’re going to have to know.” Kouji said matter-of-factly. ‘If I hadn’t been passing by and I hadn’t heard you cry out, he’d have had his way. And that’s the bare truth of it. This isn’t a safe haven for stray girls. I understand how you feel about Genrou.’ As Anzu opened her mouth to protest again. “And I don’t have a problem with you being here. But just so you know — not all of Reikaku-zan’s bandits are goodhearted rogues. There have been bad seeds before, and there will be again. Bouka’s probably not alone in sizing you up — there are no women on Reikaku-zan as a rule, and some of these guys don’t have great self control, especially when they’ve had too much to drink. Learn to defend yourself, and don’t put

yourself at risk. I might not be there to save you next time."

Anzu frowned.

"I understand." She said softly. "But… really, Kouji… thank you for helping me this time. And I will remember what you said."

Kouji flashed her a smile at this, shrugging his shoulders.

"Genrou would burn anyone who tried to rape a woman on his mountain." He said evenly. "I'm sure that if you'd been raped, and Genrou'd found out about it, Bouka wouldn't have lived to see the night out. It's true what I said — I'm more forgiving than he is, when it comes to things. Bouka might be smarting for a while, but he'll realise, when he cools down, that he got the easy option."

"I hope it doesn't mean trouble for you with the others." Anzu looked worried. "I don't want to be the cause of that."

"Ah, but I can take care of myself." Kouji smiled lazily. "Besides, Genrou'd flame me if he thought I wasn't taking care of you."

"I'm not sure if he'd be quite that angry." Anzu sighed. "He doesn't love me, so… and I don't even know if we really are friends, now. Two years is a long time… and I really don't know."

"Well, you can take it from me that Genrou's not the most perceptive to a girl's feelings. You might have to hang in there if you really want to make a mark." Kouji shrugged his shoulders.

"You've known him a long time, haven't you?"

"Well, since he came to Reikaku-zan." Kouji agreed. "He was fifteen, and I was seventeen. Hated the brat at first, that's the truth of it. He was an upstart, and like an eager puppy — into everything and nothing seemed to phase him."

He laughed.

"He's still like that, sometimes." He admitted. "Even as Kashira. But that's a good thing, I think. He takes his situation seriously, even if it doesn't always seem that he does."

Anzu smiled.

"Everyone seems to know him better than I do." She reflected. "His family, you, Chichiri. Do you think I was wrong to come here — chasing a pipe dream?"

"I don't know." Kouji said evenly. "Do you think so? Because if y'ask me, Anzu, the only kind of girl that's ever gonna break through

Genrou's thick skull is one who's both determined an' persistant. Otherwise, he'll jus' saunter along without givin' it a second thought. Besides, women are a sore point for him. They always have been, a bit. So that really depends on you. But listen, girl,"

As Anzu's brows knitted, considering the bandit's words. "If you want to be a Reikaku-zan bandit, and belong here, you're really gonna haveta toughen up an' learn to fight your own corner against fools like Bouka. Whether you charm Genrou or not, I don't mind either way — it's between you two, an' there's no sense me getting wrapped up in it more than I must. But I think we're friends, now, you and I. And I don't want to see you hurt or worse because you were naive."

Anzu smiled.

"I understand, and I appreciate it." She said softly. "You're right. I don't want to be trouble for either of you. So I'll do as you say."

"Good girl." Kouji inclined his head slightly. "Hey, how's Genrou's Pa doing?"

"Well, I wish I could fix his leg." Anzu frowned. "But better, I think."

"Good." Kouji winked at her. "Genrou might not admit it — but he's fond of his family, somewhere deep down. He'll be glad they're being taken good care of."

"Aidou went with him, you know."

"I know. I won't pretend I'm not glad about that, too." Kouji admitted. Anzu laughed.

"I don't think she's so bad." She chided.

"Well, if Genrou doesn't like girls, Aidou doesn't like men." Kouji said frankly. "And I'm quite happy to have her away from the mountain, to be honest. I've enough to be doing without that."

He tapped her on the shoulder.

"Just make sure you do absorb what I said." He added. "And I'll see you later."

Anzu watched him leave, pursing her lips.

"I promise, Kouji." She said softly. "I'm not cut out to be a bandit right at the moment. I need to learn more. And right now I'm probably not safe here, on my own, with people like Bouka waiting to take advantage. It was naive of me… but I'm not going to forget."

She frowned, then nodded, making up her mind.

“If Aidou can go with Genrou, so can I.” She decided. “I’ll catch up to them, and prove myself as a bandit. And then maybe he’ll realise I’m serious — and I’ll be able to stay here, on Reikaku-zan, without being afraid of what the other guys might do to me!”

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

The festival market was in full swing by the time Anzu reached the city of Souun, and as she darted through the busy streets and side-passages, she inwardly cursed the number of people swarming from left to right across her path. With so many folk out looking to ply their trade or pick up a bargain, it would be twice as hard to find the group of travellers, and she berated herself for having given them a head-start.

“But they would have come through this way, wouldn’t they? Souun is the nearest city — surely they’d have stopped here to ask if anyone had seen this Hotohori person?” She mused to herself as she narrowly avoided colliding with two excited children that ran in front of her. “I’ll just have to ask people and see — at least both Genrou and Chichiri are distinctive looking. I’m sure that if they have been this way, someone must remember.”

“Hey, miss, I’ve a great deal on fresh fish this afternoon, direct from the river.” A man called to her and she started, turning to face him as he offered her a broad grin.

“Best you’ll find in the Reikaku-zan area.” He said with a wink. “Or is there something else I can help you with? I’m always looking to cut a deal — my rates can’t be beaten anywhere in Souun.”

“I’m not looking to buy any fish.” Anzu admitted. “I was just wondering whether or not my friends came through this way already.”

“Friends, huh?” The stall-holder looked pensive. “Girls as pretty as you, were they? I don’t think so. I’d remember that, that’s for sure.”

“No… I mean, it’s not that.” Anzu flushed, shaking her head. “It’s two men and a woman, and they came this way, I’m sure of it. One was dressed as a monk, and he has a scar across his left eye. And the other man has red hair — he’s tall and looks sort of like a wolf. And there was a woman with them.”

“A man like a wolf, you say?” The stall-holder’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t be talking about the Reikaku-zan bandits’ *phantom* wolf, now would you?”

“Yes!” Anzu nodded her head. “Yes, that’s right. Do you know

him?”

“Ain’t a family hereabouts who don’t know about the bandits.” The man told her with a rueful smile. “Been trading here since ol’ Hakurou’s time, I have, and seen plenty, too. Bandit country this, and make no mistake about it. Now it’s young Genrou that’s the captain, they say — the man with Suzaku’s mark on his arm and the harisen that spews fire at his touch. Heard plenty, I have. Rumour has it he’s got family hereabouts. Yes, everyone in Souun knows about the Reikaku-zan bandits.”

“Then can you help me?”

“Mountain thieves usually hide in mountain bolt-holes, little lady.” The man smiled, shrugging his shoulders. “True as it is that these particular bandits have been known to split their takings with poorer people round these parts, so I won’t be saying anything against them. But they’re still bandits. I don’t want to know more about them than I have to… rumour is that if you cross the mountain path knowin’ too much, you might just get your throat slit.”

Anzu frowned, shaking her head.

“Genrou would never…” She began, then an image of Bouka flickered into her mind and she stopped, uttering a sigh.

“Maybe there are bandits who would.” She agreed at length. “So you haven’t seen him, then? Not at all?”

“No.” The stall-holder shook his head. “But I have heard a rumour that he and his people were in the eastern village last night. Burnt to the ground, it was. Whether bandits were the villains or the heroes, I wouldn’t like to be telling you. But you might want to look there for your phantom wolf.”

“The bandits helped the villagers put out the fire, so the whole mountain didn’t set ablaze.” Anzu said stiffly. “They didn’t cause it.”

“Well, like I said, it’s sometimes hard to tell with rogues like that.” The stall-holder laughed, not noticeably put out by her sudden displeasure. “And it’s been mighty nice talking to a pretty girl like you, but I have business, so if you’ll excuse me…”

“Oh. Yes, of course. I’m sorry.” Anzu blushed, stepping away from the stall and back into the crowd as the stallholder began his usual patter to the next potential customer.

“I should expect the bandits to be well known in Souun. Genrou’s village isn’t far from here, and this is, essentially, still mountain land.”

She reflected. “I wonder if that means people will help me, or if they won’t. I know that Kouji and Genrou do distribute takings to people who need it — Kouji said it was Hakurou’s way, and so they’ve always kept with it. But even so — there must be traders in this town who’ve fallen foul of bandit toll-takers on Reikaku-zan’s paths. I should be careful… and remember what Kouji said. I can’t have faith in everyone that I meet just because they seem to be on the level with me.”

Her hand slipped self-consciously beneath her cloak, brushing the hilt of the dagger she had stolen from the bandit hideout before she had left. She had not told Kouji where she was going, knowing that he would try to prevent her, and for the first time since she had left her sister’s graveside in Sairou, she realised she was completely alone.

“I could go back to the mountain.” She reflected. “But that would prove nothing. Besides, I am safer with Genrou. And I do need to be able to do this. To be a bandit, I have to learn. And I can’t be scared to walk through a city on my own. After all, I managed to get to Kounan without falling foul of anything… didn’t I?”

She pursed her lips, remembering the trek across the country, and how she had sought to protect herself by tying up her hair and dressing in men’s clothing as she crossed the hot desert land towards the Kounan border. As she had surmised, few people had troubled her, seeing her poor, dirty appearance, but a faint flush touched her cheek as she realised she did not want to resort to the same tactics again.

“If Genrou had seen me, when I turned up on Reikaku-zan, I don’t know what he’d have thought.” She decided. “And I don’t want him to see me dressed as a man. I don’t want him to think of me as his buddy, even though I do want him to accept me as a bandit. Is it too much to want to be a bandit and a woman, and have Genrou’s faith?”

“Hey, sister, spare us a penny?”

A lean youth, eyes greedy and his clothes hanging off his thin body reached out a hand to her from the pavement, grabbing her skirt in his hands and Anzu started at the sudden pull, staring down at him in surprise and uncertainty. He wasn’t much younger than she was, she realised — barely older than fifteen — yet his cadaverous appearance told a tale all of its own. One of his legs was bent and shrivelled at the foot, and a curved stick lay beside him on the ground, next to a battered pewter begging bowl. It was empty, and Anzu realised that the boy had probably not eaten in some days.

“I…” She faltered, but before she could say anything, someone else

had barged past her, giving the unfortunate beggar a rough kick as thick fingers reached out to pull him to his feet.

“You bothering this lady, street scum?” A harsh voice demanded. His tones were thick with the same mountain accent Anzu so loved to hear in Genrou’s tones, yet in this man it sounded coarser and more threatening, and a shiver ran down her spine as she turned to face him.

“Let him go!” She protested. “He didn’t do anything to me — he’s just a boy and he’s starving!”

“He’s a conniving little beggar, that’s all he is.” The brawny owner of the fist tossed his burden down against the wall as if he were no more than a sack of rags. “You oughtn’t be listening to his type, and their whines for pity and mercy. It’s all a ploy to get your money… you should wise up, sister. You don’t know these streets if you don’t know that.”

“I didn’t ask you to intervene.” Anzu’s eyes glittered, and she crouched at the boy’s side. To her horror, she realised that the youngster who had reached out his hands to her moments before now lay crumpled and broken against the brick wall, his form so emaciated and fragile that the force of the blow had struck life right out of him. A faint memory of her sister’s weak, frail form flickered across her senses and she wheeled on the stranger, eyes blazing.

“You’ve *killed* him!”

“What’s one less beggar on the streets of Souun?” The man seemed unconcerned, eying her in some amusement. “It’s not like he’s got anyone to miss him. Serves him right — if you ain’t strong enough to survive, you shouldn’t be in this world in the first place. Survival of the fittest — noone ever teach you that?”

“Get away from me.” Anzu shoved the man aside, stalking down the street away from him, but he let out a laugh, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her back towards him.

“Now, now, little lady. You’re looking for Genrou, ain’t you?”

“Genrou?” Anzu’s eyes narrowed. “Get your hands off me. Don’t think you can pretend you’re a friend of his, because I won’t believe you. Not after what you just did to that poor boy.”

“Genrou’s no friend of mine.” The man shook his head. “But it sounds like he’s a friend of *yours*. And that interests me. Well known fact round these parts, it is, that the Kashira of Reikaku-zan hates women… so what’s *your* story? Or are you one of his legendary sisters,

huh? That'd be a coup — to take Genrou's sister to Kaou-zan in chains."

"Kaou-zan?" Anzu's eyes widened, and she wrenched herself out of the man's grip. "Don't be stupid! I'm not Genrou's sister! And I'm not interested in going to your stupid mountain! I'm looking for Genrou — I'm not looking to spend time with you!"

"Huntin' a phantom wolf is an elusive business, but I'm sure he'd come running if he knew one of his hangers on was in Kaou-zan custody." The man leered at her, but Anzu was raging now and, adrenalin pumping through her veins, she drew the dagger, wielding it in front of her.

"I could slit your throat." She said coldly. "I told you, I'm not going anywhere with you. Now or ever — now get out of my way!"

"You think a puny thing like that can touch me?" The man sneered, reaching out to knock it from her grasp, but Anzu had banked on his reaction and she grabbed him with her free arm, calling on the strength in her upper body as she vaulted herself over his head, landing neatly on the ground in the alley behind him.

"Out of practice, but still too nimble for an idiot like you." She muttered, as she took advantage of her companion's surprise, getting to her feet and darting out of the alleyway into the busy crowd once more. "Thank you, Karin, for all those years of teamwork — I know you're still with me, when I do things like that."

She glanced down at the knife, eying it ruefully.

"So I don't really know what to do with this, and I'm not sure I have the courage to really use it on someone." She murmured. "But at least I got away from him — that's progress. But Kouji really wasn't kidding. I'd forgotten about Kaou-zan — I really have become stupid in two years! I'm acting like I've never had to take care of myself before, and that's stupid. I've spent my whole life…"

She frowned.

"I suppose before, Karin looked out for me." She realised. "And Raimon. Till Karin died, I didn't really have to take care of myself. No wonder Genrou's not sure what to do with me. He must think I'm still such a child, and I can't blame him."

She sank down onto a step, resting her chin in her hands as she pondered.

"I wonder where they are. Chichiri might have used his magic to

take them anywhere — I should have thought of that sooner." She said with a sigh. "Maybe I *should* go back to Reikaku-zan. But I want to help Genrou. And I can't prove that I'm good enough to be a bandit if I'm just skulking around their base, hiding behind Kouji all the time. That's not what I want. But… where do I even start?"

As she sat there, voices of passers-by drifted across to her and she sat back, finding herself listening to the odd snippets of conversation as the people moved between stalls and businesses, intend on their day's errands.

"Everything's going to the dogs these days." One woman reflected. "Prices are bound to soar now that that farming village is all burnt down."

"Lucky the whole mountain didn't go with it." Another agreed. "Whatever they say about those bandits on the mountain, they did us all a favour last night."

"Jiyou, get away from there." A man's voice snapped across the two women, making Anzu jump. "Stop being a lazy clot and help unload, you good-for-nothing…"

"…Mei-san's come in from the capital again." Before Anzu could discover what kind of a good-for-nothing the unfortunate Jiyou was, a shrill woman's voice broke through the murmur of the crowd. "You know he always brings the best fabrics."

"Not as good as Chou-san, in the textile quarter." Her equally raucous friend objected. "But in Souun, you have to make do with what you can get."

"You always harp on about Eiyou, but Souun's as good a city as any." The shrill woman pointed out. "And Chou-san doesn't trade outside of Eiyou very often since the war — not since his son was killed fighting in Hokkan. No, I'm decided. Mei-san will do for me."

"Well, he brings news from the city, at least. Even if it is an hour's ride or more." The second woman acknowledged. "You know what his wife told me this morning, when I was buying cloth for my daughter's new robes? You know, that fine peach silk that I was showing you earlier?"

"What did he tell you?" Clearly the shrill woman was more interested in gossip than in cloth, and her friend tut-tutted.

"Apparently there's been another ghost sighting in the capital. But its little wonder, given the fact everything's all which ways as it is." She said sagely. "The Emperor can't rest so long as Kounan's in peril,

isn't that what they say? He was such a good, conscientious leader. We were much better off when he was ruler of Kounan."

"Even though he took us to war against Kutou?"

"The war would have come, my dear, regardless. With that cold eyed foreigner in charge of the Kutou army — you know what they say about those Hin people, and he was every bit the proof. To think how he cut Saihitei-sama down… the Emperor gave his life saving us all, and such a young, handsome man to die so tragically. But then, they do say, he was one of Suzaku's own… so it was bound to come, sooner or later."

The voices drifted away, leaving Anzu rooted to the step, her eyes big as she absorbed what she had heard.

"The Emperor. That's who Chichiri and Tasuki were looking for." She breathed. "And he's in Eiyou — he must be, if people think they've seen his ghost. Which means… that's where Chichiri and Tasuki and Aidou have gone! Oh, I'm in luck! If I can hire a horse… Eiyou's not that long a ride from here, and I know I could definitely make it by nightfall."

She got to her feet, rummaging in her pockets for the few coins she had taken when she had taken the dagger, eying them ruefully.

"I'm a better sneak thief than Genrou gives me credit for, but he doesn't need to know about this." She decided. "If the money's spent, then it's spent — and it's all in a good cause. I'll find a horse and head for the capital. It's been a long time since I visited Eiyou, but I think I can remember it well enough to navigate my way there. There are some benefits to having travelled with a circus troupe — and it's time I used them to my best advantage."

She clenched her hand around the coins, glancing up at the sky as resolution settled in her heart.

"I'm still looking after Genrou, Reirei." She murmured. "And Oneechan, watch over us both, all right? I'm going to Eiyou. I'll keep faith with Genrou, I promise — so you and Raimon don't need to worry about me being alone!"

"So, now we're away from the mountain, can you pick anything up?"

As they walked through the trackway that led alongside the charred remains of the eastern village, Tasuki cast Chichiri a quizzical look, kicking idly against a stray fragment of blackened timber as he did so.

“Hotohori, I mean — can you sense where the guy’s got to now?”

“Not at all.” Chichiri admitted sadly. “And I’ve been trying since we left Reikaku-zan, too. It’s so frustrating, you know? Last night his chi was so strong — blazing from him, even if it was strange and tainted in some way. And now — he’s vanished. It’s just like Nuriko. Before we left Reikaku-zan, I had a brief awareness of him — but now I can’t sense him, either.”

“So we’re going to walk in definite circles until you do?” Aidou asked drolly. “I see.”

“Oneechan, if you’re going to be that way, go back to the damn mountain already, will you?” Tasuki looked frustrated. “It’s not a quick little trip to the town market — we’re hunting for dead people, and that kind of thing ain’t easy. Not even for Chichiri.”

“No, Aidou-san is right.” Chichiri sighed. “It is pointless, walking in circles. If we’re going to go looking for him, we’re going to have to think a little bit more laterally… and not rely on my ability to sense his movements quite so much. I’m not sure if it’s the nature of his condition at the moment, or if I only sensed him so strongly before because his character was blazing so brightly on his neck when we saw him here last night. Maybe, in the state he is now, his chi isn’t strong enough for me to pick up when his character isn’t showing. Either way, we can waste time here, or we can try and think of another strategy.”

“Such as?” Tasuki paused, eying his companion expectantly, and Chichiri grimaced — at least, as much as it was possible for a monk to grimace from behind the shelter of a kitsune mask.

“Why is it I always have to come up with the answers?” He objected. “I can’t think of everything, you know!”

“Can’t you?” Tasuki looked genuinely surprised, and Chichiri sighed, shaking his head in defeat.

“Fine.” He said wearily. “The only thing I can think of is that we could try heading to Eiyou.”

“The capital?” Aidou looked startled. “Why would we go there?”

“Well, it’s something of a long-shot.” Chichiri admitted. “But when Hotohori’s spirit was last expelled from Taikyoku-zan, it ended up at the palace, with Houki-sama and Boushin. Perhaps the same has happened now.”

“That’s true.” Tasuki’s face cleared. “That rock-headed little brat

that had Tama's memory stone inside of him. I remember now."

"That rock-headed brat is now Emperor of Kounan, you know." Despite the situation, Chichiri was amused.

"That doesn't change the fact he has a boulder for a skull." Tasuki said firmly. "Besides, if Hotohori wasn't dead last night — doesn't that make *him* Emperor? He's Boushin's father, right?"

"I don't think dead men can be re-crowned, and I didn't say Hotohori was alive last night." Chichiri shook his head. "Saihitei-sama has been buried — he's entombed within Suzaku's shrine. What we saw last night is an *incarnation* of his Highness — and it still feels natural to think of him as Emperor and call him Hotohori-sama. But it wasn't the sense of a living form, on that horse. Not a spirit, either. But not quite alive."

"That's not logical." Tasuki protested. "He's either dead or he ain't. Which is it?"

"He's both. He's dead, and he's not. It's just the way it is."

"You just like sayin' things that don't make sense to confuse me, don't you?" Tasuki frowned.

"I wouldn't have thought that would be too hard, otouto-kun." Aidou said frankly, and Tasuki sent her a dark look.

"Noone asked you." He shot back.

He gestured to the *kasa*.

"So are we taking the short cut, or is your hat still playing silly games after it's encounter with Taikyoku-zan?" He asked. "You did say last night that you thought it was okay… is it?"

"Whether it's the hat or my magic that was affected, I think both are in tune with one another now, you know?" Chichiri assured him. "I can connect a spell to it — I'm pretty sure about that. But…"

He faltered, glancing at Aidou, who looked startled.

"Is something wrong?"

"Chichiri thinks you're not gonna like hat-hopping." Tasuki said bluntly. "And he's probably right."

"Hat…" Aidou frowned. "What does he mean, Chichiri-san?"

"What he says, although I wish he'd find a better term for it." Chichiri's mouth twitched into a smile. "I can use my magic to transfer us to Eiyou through my *kasa*, that's all. It's something I've done a lot

of times before. Tasuki's used to it, but I didn't want to force you…"

"I'm not a weak woman. I'm sure I can manage." Aidou said firmly. "If that's the quickest way to get this adventure all sealed up, then I'm not going to be the stumbling block. Go ahead, Chichiri-san. Do what you have to do. I'll be fine."

"I bet you cry." Tasuki said frankly, and Aidou glared at him.

"*You* cry more than I do, and you call yourself a man." She said scathingly. "Shut up, Shun'u. I'm not afraid of Chichiri-san's hat. I have more faith that he knows what he's doing than you do with that toy fan of yours, in any case."

"You haven't experienced his landings, yet." Tasuki muttered. "And my tessen is *not* a toy!"

Chichiri cast a look of amusement between the bickering siblings.

"Well, since it seems to be decided, let's get going." He said evenly. "I'll try and take us direct to the palace — that should save us some time, and I know that Houki-sama will probably be willing to speak to us."

"Just so long as the little tyke's otherwise engaged." Tasuki said warily. "My legs can't stand up to another assault."

Chichiri grinned. Then, he twitched his hat, focusing his magic on the Kounan royal palace. In a matter of seconds they found themselves standing outside the main gate, Chichiri's landing having been — Tasuki to the contrary — exactly right.

"I don't know what all the fuss was about." Aidou reflected, gazing up at the impressive columns as she did so. "That was easy."

"It's only Tasuki I like to dump up trees or in holes." Chichiri grinned, sending the bandit a playful glance. "Well, we're here. I hope Houki-sama isn't otherwise engaged. At the very least, we should pay our respects to Hotohori's grave… shouldn't we?"

"Except he's not in it… at least not totally." Tasuki muttered, as a guard stepped forward to find out their business. "Do we tell Houki that her husband went on a rampage and burned down a village? Or are we keeping that a secret for the time being?"

"I think we'll keep it a secret." Chichiri reflected. He eyed Tasuki keenly. "That was very thoughtful of you, you know… are you feeling all right?"

"Well, she tends to cry a lot when you talk about Hotohori." Tasuki

admitted. “It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“She’s a widow, who lost the man she loved.” Aidou reflected. “You could try and have a bit of compassion, Shun’u. He sacrificed his life to save Kounan, in the end. There are a lot of families left without loved ones because of that war, you know — just because your thick skull withstood all that Kutou threw at you, you have to think of other people.”

“Besides, Tasuki-kun, you *have* been known to shed tears yourself, when someone died.” Chichiri teased. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No, it’s completely different.” Tasuki folded his arms. “There ain’t any shame in a man shedding tears for a fallen comrade in battle. What girls do when they mope and moon over someone is totally unrelated.”

“Houki is a strong woman, though. At least, she’s become strong.” Chichiri responded pensively. “And she’s always been welcoming to us, no matter how much it reminds her of better days.”

He turned to acknowledge the guard, offering him a smile as he removed his mask.

“We’re hoping to speak to the Dowager Empress Yotaigo.” He said lightly. “Would you tell her that it’s Tasuki and Chichiri of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi, and that we’ve come to pay our respects to the Shrine of Suzaku and the grave of his Highness Saihitei-sama?”

“Chichiri-sama!” Recognition flashed into the man’s eyes, and he bowed, nodding his head. “At once, of course! Please, you are always welcome within the palace — the Dowager Empress will be most happy to see you, and so will Lord Haku.”

He withdrew, and Tasuki sent Chichiri a blank look.

“Who the hell’s Lord Haku? Don’t tell me ol’ Houki’s gone and taken a lover, since her husband’s wormbait now?”

Chichiri winced, clapping his hand over his companion’s mouth before he could say any more.

“Haku Shouei is — *was* — Hotohori-sama’s Prime Minister, and he and Houki-sama are in control of the country until Boushin is old enough to make decisions for himself as Emperor.” He hissed. “Houki might be our friend, Tasuki, but if you say things like that inside the palace walls you might still get your head cut off for treason!”

“Hey, get off! I was just asking!” Tasuki pulled himself free, looking indignant. “It was only a question. I can’t remember every bearded

guy who wanders around the palace. Haku Shouei, huh? I remember now."

"Well, just keep remembering it." Chichiri instructed. "Because if nothing else, you'll hurt Houki's feelings if you jump to wild conclusions like that in front of her. You know she loved Hotohori-sama with all of her heart, Tasuki — *try* and be a little more sensitive, okay?"

"The word isn't in his vocabulary." Aidou muttered. "You're wasting your time, Chichiri-san."

"If you ask me, all this love stuff is nothing but a hassle for people anyway." Tasuki pulled a face. "All it does it make girls cry and guys confused."

"Maybe I'll gag you." Chichiri eyed him speculatively, and Tasuki looked alarmed, holding up his hands.

"Hey, don't even think about it!" He exclaimed. "I'm not gonna say anything to Houki — will you get a grip already? Geez! I was just making an observation!"

Fortunately at that moment, further palace guards arrived to usher them into the grounds proper, and before long they were entering the shrine of Suzaku, where a slender, delicate young lady of approximately Tasuki's age stood waiting for them. Although dressed in the fine robes of a widowed Empress, there was a gentle prettiness to her face, and despite the hint of tragedy in her eyes, she offered them a smile, bowing her head to each of the Seishi in turn as she gestured for them to join her by the statue of the Beast God.

"I'm surprised to see you, though glad, of course." She said, in soft, musical tones. "Chichiri-san, Tasuki-san — what brings you to the palace on a day like this? And who is your companion? I don't believe we've met."

"That's my sister Aidou." Tasuki said with a grimace. "Don't mind her — she invited herself along, but it's really Chichiri and I who came to see you."

"Tasuki, that's rude, you know." Chichiri objected, as Aidou visibly bristled at the offhandedness of his introduction. Houki laughed, however, holding out a hand of greeting to the young woman.

"It's a pleasure, Aidou-san." She said gently, and Aidou bowed her head, prevented by the woman's status from making any rejoinder to her brother's remarks.

“We’ve come for two reasons.” Chichiri said pensively, as he gazed up at Suzaku’s statue. “Of course, to pay our respects and to ensure you and Boushin-kun are both well. Hotohori-sama would want us to do that, at least, and it’s been a while since we were last here.”

“Boushin and I are fine.” Houki agreed. “It’s still painful, knowing he’s gone but… since your last visit — since I knew he was watching over us, I feel more at peace.”

She smiled, and for a moment, her face lit up, revealing how pretty the Empress truly was.

“I think he’s still here, sometimes.” She admitted. “There have been reports… people have said they’ve seen him, around the palace. I don’t know if it’s true — I see him in my dreams every night, and I’m sure, as Boushin grows, I’ll see him in his son’s face, also. But it’s comforting, the idea of having him close. Even if he can’t reach out to touch us — it helps.”

“That’s the other reason we came.” Chichiri nodded, his gaze warning Tasuki to keep his mouth shut on the subject of burning villages. “It might sound strange, but we… were looking for His Highness. Last night, there was… well, a sighting of him, not too very far from here. And we wondered about it. The Suzaku Shichi Seishi’s work is supposed to be at an end, but I’ve clearly sensed his presence a couple of times, too.”

“When Kounan is in danger, the Miko will come and unite the seven stars of Suzaku.” Houki quoted softly. “But that’s all over now, isn’t it? Miaka-san isn’t with you — she truly has gone back to her own world?”

“Yes, and Tamahome with her.” Chichiri agreed. “Which is why we’re so confused. That his Highness should want to make sure you and Boushin are okay is one thing, but he was seen away from the palace. We’d like to know why.”

“My husband’s will was far stronger than any human body.” Houki said reflectively. “If he felt, even for a moment, that his people were in danger — even beyond the grave, even in the form of a spirit… I believe he would come to set things to rights. He always put the people first — he always cared so much about Kounan. If it is true, and he has been seen away from the palace, then I can only imagine some kind of danger threatens this country.”

She frowned.

“But you think so also, don’t you, Chichiri-san?” She asked.

“Because you’ve come here looking for him.”

“Yes.” Chichiri admitted. “Although you shouldn’t worry yourself, Houki-sama. I’m sure that we’ll find out whatever that is, and we’ll put a stop to it before any harm really befalls Kounan.”

“I have faith in you.” Houki smiled again. “Just as my husband did. He believed in you all and I think, when he was with you, he was truly a happy man. I know you are strong, and I’m sure you will be able to succeed… whatever the problem you face.”

“Did you say His Highness had been haunting the palace?” Tasuki put in at that moment. “Floatin’ around it or what?”

“No… no.” Houki frowned. “Like I said, he hasn’t revealed himself to me personally. I think… well, when he left us the last time, I think he understood how painful it was for me to see him, even though it also brought me much joy. Boushin and I have to move on with life, and he knew that — that’s why he’s not made himself visible to me since then. But last night, there was some commotion among the guards. One of the sentries on the northern gate was sent into such a panic that he deserted his post. He claims to have seen and more, spoken to the late Emperor’s spirit.”

“Last night, huh?” Tasuki frowned. “But…”

He caught Chichiri’s eye, and faltered, grimacing at his friend.

“Late last night.” Houki agreed. “I was asleep when it occured, although the matter reached Lord Haku when it happened. The soldier has been questioned, and it’s unclear what he did or didn’t see. At the moment he’s been discharged of duties, since the whole matter quite upset him — I’m loath to have him punished for abandoning the gate, if it truly was Saihitei’s spirit he saw. But noone else was with him — so it’s difficult to prove. Haku-sama thinks it might have been caused by alcohol or an attempt to cover up dereliction of duty… but I don’t know.”

“Is Haku-sama here?” Chichiri wondered. Houki shook her head.

“He’s meeting with some northern delegates this morning. I excused myself, on account of last night’s disturbance — when I first heard what had happened, it shook me.” She admitted. “I came here instead, and then you arrived… perhaps some part of me expected you to, although I don’t remember thinking about it as such. Still, you Seishi are connected, and I know that you were able to see his spirit before I was able, the last time you were here. If he is in the palace, I’m sure that you would be able to find him.”

“If he is in the palace, I can’t sense him at the moment.” Chichiri admitted defeatedly. “I thought I might, if we came here — where he lies buried. But even beneath the wings of the God himself — I can’t find any trace of Hotohori-sama’s chi.”

“So why don’t we grab this guard who says he saw the guy’s ghost… ask him a few questions?” Tasuki suggested. “He might know something… right?”

“Houki-sama, would that be all right?” Chichiri asked, and Houki nodded her head.

“I have no objection.” She agreed. “My late husband valued you as friends and equals — you don’t need my permission to move around the palace. Especially when Kounan’s protection is involved.”

“Thank you.” Chichiri smiled. “Then I think that’s what we’ll do.”

His grin widened, and he glanced at Tasuki.

“Looks like we won’t get to visit Boushin this time.” He said playfully. “But I’m sure you can carry our greetings to him, Houki-sama.”

“I will do so.” Houki agreed. “And if there’s anything you need, please feel free to ask. As for the soldier, any of the guards will be able to take you to his quarters — tell them that you have my backing — although few of them would argue with one of Suzaku’s chosen about matters of this kind.”

As they left the shrine, Chichiri paused, glancing around at the palace thoughtfully.

“I almost thought to ask her about help for the village.” He admitted. “But then I’d have to explain why — and I don’t want to upset her.”

“The village is dead, Chichiri-san. People have already left it behind.” Aidou said pragmatically. “We saw that, when we walked through there earlier on. Noone will go there now. With the help of the bandits, they’ll find a way to start anew. Our kind are tough, we survive, and they’ll build new lives somewhere else. It’ll just be another village that rots into insignificance and nonexistance, that’s all.”

“Just like the many brought down by Kutou’s army.” Chichiri frowned. “Why do I think that there’s some kind of connection there?”

“Kutou haven’t bothered us in two years. Not since Nakago got skewered by Tamahome’s fist.” Tasuki said bluntly. “So how could

there be a connection? Their country fell apart, their ruling class was slaughtered — and they're having enough to do rebuilding themselves. Why would they care about Kounan now? That war is over… how could there be a connection?"

"No, it's more like… well, the expression on Hotohori-sama's face." Chichiri admitted. "When he drew his sword and tried to attack us. He had the same look on his face when he charged down Nakago, the day that he died. I wonder…"

"You think that Hotohori's got so screwballed by this Taikyoku-zan magic mixup that he's still stuck two years in the past? That he thinks it was Nakago he was attacking, not you?" Tasuki's eyes widened. Chichiri nodded.

"It occured to me." He agreed. "That maybe he thought he was defending Kounan — just in the way Houki just said."

"So what do we do about it, then?"

"We find a guard and ask to see this man who saw a ghost." Chichiri said evenly. "First things first. We need to know more."

"I never thought I'd be wanderin' round a royal palace like this." Aidou admitted, as they made their way across to speak to one of the sentries. "Without anyone minding what we do and where we go."

"When we were fighting together, we stayed here, a lot of the time." Tasuki told her, a flicker of self-satisfaction in his eyes as he read the awe in her face. "As equals of the Emperor, no less — just as Houki jus' said it. So you should treat me with more respect now, Aidou-neechan. After all, I'm a trusted ally of the royal house of Kounan *these* days."

"Your head's gonna get too big for you to hold up if you go on that way." Was Aidou's crushing rejoinder. "Delusions of grandeur don't suit you, Shun'u… and it didn't much help his Highness in the end, now did it?"

"Hotohori-sama sacrificed himself trying to take out Nakago — a powerful man with Seiryuu's magic in his blood and no compunction about who or what he had to destroy to get his way." Chichiri said slowly. "Powerful men make powerful enemies, Aidou-san. It's long been my belief that Nakago wanted to kill Hotohori-sama sooner… it just struck him as doubly fortunate when he realised that the Emperor of Kounan was also one of Suzaku's chosen men. I don't believe Tasuki — or anyone — could have prevented what happened that day. Nakago was brutal — only the sealing of Seiryuu's power allowed him

to be beaten, in the end."

"So there." Tasuki poked out his tongue, completely ignoring the fact he was inside a royal building and representing the beast God himself as he sent his sister a triumphant look. "What he said. You're damn lucky I'm as good a fighter as I am, else I might not have made it back alive at all."

Aidou glanced at her hand thoughtfully, and Tasuki flinched instinctively out of her way, giving her a wide birth as Chichiri singled out one of the sentries to speak to. As he did so, the monk sighed.

"If you know she's going to hit you for saying stuff, why do you say it, you know?" He asked. "Seriously, Tasuki, think about it a little, huh?"

Tasuki merely scowled, and Chichiri hurried up to the guard, offering him a smile as the man — someone he recognised from their last visit — bowed his head.

"Chichiri-sama!"

"We were hoping to speak to the guard who claimed to see his Highness's ghost last night." Chichiri explained. "Houki… I mean, Yotaigo-sama has said it'll be all right. Could you take us to his quarters, please?"

"Yes, sir, of course." The guard nodded, gesturing for them to follow him. "Although I don't know if you'll get much sense from him, all things considered. He swears he didn't touch a drop before going on duty last night, but he was none too coherent when Haku-sama questioned him, or any of the other officials here."

"You think he's lying, then?" Tasuki demanded. The guard shrugged.

"I have no idea." He said frankly. "But Saihitei-sama's spirit must have passed into the next world now, surely. It's been two years since he died."

"Well, I guess we'll find out." Chichiri pursed his lips. "Something tells me that it's not quite that simple."

The guard's quarters were at the furthermost point of the palace, inside the busy, bustling barracks. As the two Seishi and their companion passed through, a few stares and whispers went their way, as many of the men recognised Chichiri and Tasuki, and wondered about their female companion. As they sought to draw closer, however, the official on duty shouted at them to be about their

business, and within a remarkably short period of time, the hallways were all but clear of men.

“Jintou!” The guard rapped on the door of the small room. “Jintou, there are people to speak to you. Suzaku’s warriors Lord Tasuki and Lord Chichiri have come on the Dowager Empress’s instruction to question you about Saihitei-sama’s spirit — unlock this door!”

There was a moment of silence, then the sound of a lock being pulled back, as the door slid open to reveal the room’s sole occupant. At the sight of his face, Chichiri drew breath sharply, registering the look of dulled shock that still flickered in the man’s brown eyes.

“Will you leave us with him?” He asked the guard, who bowed in assent, withdrawing and leaving them alone with the young man who went by the name Jintou.

A moment of silence passed, then Tasuki stepped forwards.

“We want to know about his Highness’s ghost.” He said sharply. “Where he went, what he did, and why the hell he was at the palace last night — so hurry up and tell us everything you know, all right?”

Jintou stared at him, fear flickering briefly in his eyes at the tall, brawny bandit who stared back at him impatiently, waiting for an answer.

“Tasuki, don’t shout at him.” Chichiri scolded. “The man’s had a shock — you need to be a bit more gentle.”

“I’m only trying to find out where His Highness has gone now.” Tasuki retorted. “Before he burns down another village with that sword of his.”

At this, the young man’s eyes opened wide with terror, and for a moment Chichiri thought that he would dart back inside of his chamber, pulling the door behind him. He slipped a foot between the wood and the panel wall, casting his red haired companion a long suffering look before conveying a smile on the unfortunate soldier.

“We just want to know what you saw.” He said gently, but Jintou did not seem to be any more forthcoming, staring at Chichiri’s scar with a mixture of fright and dismay. As Chichiri realised the cause of his distress, he frowned, raising his finger absently to his left cheek.

“We were friends of his Highness.” He said quietly. “I’m Chichiri, and this is Tasuki — members of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. We’re not here to hurt you.”

But Jintou’s gaze remained fixed on the cruel, jagged wound, and

the monk realised he was not going to get any further with this mode of approach than Tasuki had with his direct demands. He sighed, stepping back as he considered the best course of action to take. That the man was clearly frightened out of his wits was beyond doubt, and Chichiri suspected that the questioning of Haku and his associates had been thorough and demanding.

“And he thinks he’s in for some more of the same.” He reflected. “Because I look like someone who might hurt him, and Tasuki’s enough to scare anyone, when he looks at them like that. A scarred monk and a phantom wolf — not the most gentle of appearances. I should have remembered to put my mask on again before we left the shrine — but it’s too late now.”

“Let me try.”

As if she’d heard his thoughts, Aidou slipped into the room, pushing back the hood of her cloak as she cast a glance at the scared youngster. He stared at her in surprise, and Aidou smiled, shrugging her shoulders.

“Some things need a woman’s touch.” She said softly. “Chichiri-san, Shun’u — he’s frightened of you. Step back. Let me try.”

“But…” Tasuki’s eyebrows shot up at this, and he shook his head. “Oneechan, you don’t want us to leave you alone in here with this guy? He looks half crazy, and you were the one who objected to being stuck with bandits on the mountain!?”

“Just do what I said, bonehead.” Aidou told him firmly. “Go wait outside. I’ll find out what you want to know.”

Chichiri bit his lip, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Let her try.” He said softly. “Come on, Tasuki. Let’s do as she says.”

“But… I can’t!” Tasuki protested. “What kind of a man would I be if I left my sister alone in a chamber with a half-crazed palace guard?”

“Well, if you don’t, you’ll be a bruised kind of man.” Aidou said evenly. “Listen, Shun’u. We want to find the guy who burnt the village, isn’t that what this little jaunt is about? To make sure it doesn’t happen again? I don’t want that any more than you do, so if I can find out what you want to know, why shouldn’t I try? You think I can’t handle myself? Believe me, I can.”

“And you really think you have a better chance than Chichiri does?” Tasuki demanded. Aidou sighed.

“I’m a woman.” She said categorically, as if it explained everything. “Just go outside. It will be all right.”

Before Tasuki could object any further, Chichiri took him firmly by the arm, leading him out of the chamber and closing the door softly behind them. Tasuki wheeled on him, anger in his eyes, but Chichiri pressed a finger to his lips, shaking his head.

“We need to know what this man saw.” He said softly. “Aidou is right. We frighten him — he’s obviously already been heavily interrogated, and us being Seishi like his Highness probably makes the situation worse. Besides, I was careless and I forgot to replace my mask… I’ve gotten so used to being around people who don’t mind it that I didn’t think of what might happen if I confronted him with my scar visible like that. It obviously unnerved him. And you’re… not exactly gentle when you go in for the kill. Aidou is a woman, like she says. Her approach is bound to be less of a threat to him.”

“Have you *met* my sister?” Tasuki demanded. Chichiri laughed.

“Yes, but I don’t think that you’re being fair to her.” He said wisely. “Just because she’s hard on you doesn’t mean she’s going to use the same tactics on every man she meets.”

“And if he tries anything on her? What then?”

“I think Aidou-san is more than able to take care of herself. She *is* your sister, at the end of the day.”

“What’s that meant to mean?”

“Just pipe down, and let her do her best.” Chichiri shrugged. “He might feel more comfortable, talking to a woman. He’s a young man, probably not much older than you are. And Aidou has a strong air about her… I’m sure she can draw out whatever he saw, if he doesn’t feel he’s going to be beaten for telling an untruth.”

“You believe Jintou really saw Hotohori-sama, don’t you.”

“Yes, I do.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “After he fell from the horse, he disappeared. I think this is where he came — our instinct was right. What we need to know is where he is now.”

Before Tasuki could respond, the door of the chamber opened, and Aidou emerged, offering them a smile as she refastened her cloak around her shoulders.

“Well, shall we go?” She asked lightly.

“Oneechan!” Tasuki was alert immediately. “What… are you… did

he… are you all right?”

“Are you worried about me, Shun’u?” Aidou eyed him keenly. “I’m fine. Don’t be so stupid. He’s a scared boy — he’s not going to try and hurt me. He’s just afraid, that’s all. He’s never seen a ghost before… and he’s worried that it means retribution of some kind.”

“So he did talk to you?” Chichiri asked. Aidou nodded.

“He said he saw the Emperor’s spirit outside the northern gate, staring up at the building as if he didn’t know what he was doing there or how he came to arrive there.” She agreed. “He didn’t seem sure of himself — either that, or he was testing the boy — Jintou was a bit incoherent on that point. They talked about the stars, and Saihitei-sama asked him to name the constellations of Suzaku. Then Jintou let slip that he believed he was talking to a ghost, and that’s when he took fright. Apparently there was a strange look in Saihitei-sama’s eye when he said it — he lost his nerve and he fled.”

“And I suppose that we don’t know where Hotohori-sama went after that? Great.” Tasuki sighed. “Some interrogation, sis.”

“The boy can’t tell me what he doesn’t know.” Aidou snapped, bringing her hand down hard against the back of her brother’s head. “It was better than you managed.”

“Well, Aidou-san has at least told us one thing we can work with.” Chichiri sighed, leaning up against the wall as he contemplated. “His Highness’s memories were addled. He didn’t know why he was at the palace, and I think it’s probable he didn’t remember firing the village either, you know? I’m thinking my first assumption was the true one. He was reliving some kind of past nightmare when we met him in the eastern village. He may have been drawn there because it was close to Reikaku-zan, and you and I were in the Souun area at the time. It’s possible his Seishi connections brought him close to us, or some other force drew him there, because it wanted us to notice him. But he did not attack your home of his own free will… he didn’t know what he was doing, when he set fire to that place. And I think he probably did see Nakago standing before him, rather than you or I. When he came off his horse, he seemed so disorientated that I’m certain that’s the truth.”

“But if it happened once, it could happen again.” Tasuki pointed out. Chichiri nodded.

“If we can find him soon, then so much the better.” He agreed.

“Jintou said one other thing, Chichiri-san.” Aidou remembered. “He

said that the Emperor said the Lady Houki's name. Once."

"Then he was drawn here because of her and Boushin." Chichiri reflected. "Just as we thought. And it probably means he's still in the area somewhere — looking for somewhere that feels safe."

"So we keep looking in the capital, then?" Tasuki asked. Chichiri nodded.

"We'll ask if anyone's seen a young man with a startling resemblance to the late Emperor." He agreed slowly. "And I'll keep trying to sense his chi while we go. If it's connected to the appearance of his character, then it might not happen again while we're here — but at least if it does, I'll be primed for it. And if his character isn't blazing the way it was last night, then he can't be attacking any villages."

"No news is good news, in fact." Aidou reflected. "All right. Then I suppose there's nothing to do but start asking people questions, is there?"

"You really are going to stay with us the whole time?" Tasuki stared at her, and Aidou snorted.

"I told you I was. Someone has to make sure you don't kill yourself, and besides, this was my village too." She said pragmatically. "Besides, didn't I already prove my usefulness to you? Shut up complaining, Shun'u, and let's get moving, all right?"

She stalked purposefully past him, cloak fluttering behind her as she walked, and Chichiri chuckled, patting his companion on the shoulder.

"You really don't have any luck where women are concerned, do you?" He bantered. "Come on. She's right, you know. At least now we have a little to go on. I'm sure we'll find him before the day is out."

Random babble:

Hotohori's burial place — I don't think that's mentioned in the manga, but in Sanbou Den Houki tells Chichiri and Tasuki when they return from Miaka's world that that's where he's buried, in the shrine of Suzaku, beneath the statue of the God (With Miaka's li'l teddy bear marking the spot… aww). His Prime Minister is also mentioned by name in Suzaku Hi Den as Haku Shouei. The name Yotaigo for Houki (Youtaigo? Haven't seen the Kanji, just the anime, so I'm not sure) is used in Eikouden to mark her status as Dowager Empress. But I imagine that Chichiri and Tasuki would still call her Houki. And I'm going to. .

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

Well, so she had made it to Eiyou.

Anzu peered though the slats of the trader's wagon that she had concealed herself aboard, watching as the streets and houses grew closer and closer together and more and more people massed along the sides of the streets. As the ramshackle contraption slowed to accomodate the moving traffic, she took a deep breath, leaping nimbly down onto the cobbles and startling several small children as they worked to place fresh fruit out on their stall. With an apologetic smile at the eldest, Anzu rummaged in her pocket for the coins she had taken from the mountain.

"A wagon was cheaper than a horse, and with the festival, they're all hired out anyway… so I was lucky." She mused to herself, counting the amount carefully, then slipping most of it back into the folds of her clothing. Selecting two of the best looking apricots from the family's stall, she dropped the coins into the hands of the young keeper, then sauntered along the main street, deep in thought as she consumed her namesake prize.

"I wonder if Kouji knows I've gone yet." She mused absently. "I guess he will soon. I hope he isn't too worried — or too angry. Still, he can't get to Genrou before I can, now. I'm sure that this is where they've come, if this is where Hotohori was last seen. And that being the case, all I have to do is keep my eyes open for them. People here must have noticed them, also. I'm sure I'll see them soon."

She tossed the stone of her apricot away, sinking her teeth into the second one as she gazed around her. It had been some time since she had been to the capital of Kounan, thanks to the nature of her work with her sister and the travelling troupe. In fact, as Karin had become weaker, they had not moved far from Sairou, leaving the troupe and working on their own, whenever the older girl had been well enough. The infection that had eventually claimed her life had moved quickly through her weakened body, but if she was honest with herself, Anzu had known for a while beforehand that her sister's life was ebbing out of her.

"Ever since she caught that cough when we were playing in the Sairou capital. She was never really fit after that, and she always

made sure I ate, but she hardly touched anything herself." She reflected sadly. "I wish I had known what to do about it, then. I wish I'd been able to find more money to pay for herbal remedies, or even for her to see a doctor. I would have liked her to have come back with me to Kounan. It's not nice, being alone… I hope I can find Genrou and Chichiri quickly. Even if what they're doing is dangerous, I'd rather be with them than on my own."

She tossed the second stone aside, realising as she did so that she had reached the end of the long rows of market stalls and traders, and instead had stumbled into what was known as the 'textiles quarter'. Busy merchants and their servants moved here and there, shifting cloth from wagons and exchanging instructions as customers browsed and placed orders, and one building in particular stood out over the whole region. Anzu frowned, recognising the character for "Chou" over the main door.

"That's the man that that woman was talking about." She murmured. "The one who lost his son. It seems like the war really did hurt everyone in Kounan in some way. Even rich merchants, as well as poor villagers. Aidou's fiance, Chou-san's son… the Emperor Saihitei-sama. Death touches everyone, and yet here I am, bemoaning the fact Karin isn't here alongside me. I'm sorry, Oneechan. I'm sorry, Reirei. I didn't mean to sound so pathetic. I'm not here to mope over things in the past. Like the people in this city, I've got to move on. Genrou and Reikaku-zan is my future — I just have to find a way to prove it."

She turned, new resolution in her heart as she crossed the square towards the textile merchant's impressive premises. A young girl stood outside, sweeping the dust and dirt of the day's trading from the steps, and as Anzu approached she paused, offering her a smile.

"Can I help you, miss?" She asked, her accent giving her away as a native of the city. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Actually, someone." Anzu pinkened. "I was… with friends in Eiyou, but I've been seperated from them. I wondered if you might have seen them at all."

"Well, a lot of people come through here. Maybe I have." The girl grinned. "Can you tell me what they look like?"

"Yes." Anzu nodded. "One is tall, with red hair and a… a look of a wolf about him. And the other is a monk — he may wear a mask, but if not, he has a scar over his left eye, and he dresses…"

She faltered, noticing the change in the girl's expression. It had gone from amiable to apprehensive and she trailed off, confusing

flickering in her gaze.

“Is something wrong?” She murmured. The girl bit her lip, glancing around behind her. Then she took Anzu gently by the arm, leading her away from the shop premises.

“You didn’t say you were looking for Suzaku warriors, miss.” She said quietly. “It’s Tasuki-sama and Chichiri-sama you seek, isn’t it? Men of the Beast God.”

“Yes.” Anzu looked startled. “Have you seen them, then? Do you… do you know them?”

“Yes, miss. I’ve met both, but I’ve not seen them in some months.” The girl sighed, glancing back towards the shop. “I’m sorry. You must think me strange, for acting like this with you on such an innocent request. But… tell me, were you known to all the Suzaku Shichi Seishi? Or just Chichiri-sama and Tasuki-sama?”

“Just those two. The others are either gone or passed away, so I understand it.” Anzu was flummoxed. The girl’s expression darkened, and she nodded her head, gesturing to the shop premises.

“Master Ryuuen was one of the Suzaku Celestial Warriors.” She said sadly, and Anzu was aware of genuine grief in her eyes. “Nuriko, that was what he was known as. He was an unusual young man, we all knew that. But he was much loved, especially by his family. The Master and Mistress, and master Rokou — they deal with it as bravely as they can. But tragedy struck this family two times too many, over the years. They lost a little girl, before I came into their service. And then, to get word from the Palace that Ryuuen-sama was dead, too…”

She trailed off, shaking her head.

“They carry on, as all people must, but we don’t talk about it more than we have to.” She added. “Those friends of yours, they came here once — and quite upset Rokou-sama to begin with. I’ve not seen either one of them since, but… the shadow of Suzaku still hangs over this house.”

“Nuriko.” Anzu breathed. “I’m sorry. I had no idea. I mean, I met Gen… Tasuki and Chichiri after the others had all passed away. I didn’t know that this was where Nuriko came from.”

“Well, we all liked Master Ryuuen, despite his peculiarities.” The serving girl sighed. “He was always kind-hearted, and full of life and mischief. So he’s much missed in the textile quarter. I don’t expect your friends will come here, miss, knowing that. I doubt they’ll want to stir up more of Rokou-sama’s memories.”

“Yes, you’re probably right.” Anzu inclined her head in agreement. “Thank you for your help, anyway. Hopefully I’ll track them down soon — and I’m sorry… I’m sorry that so many people lost so much in the war with Kutou. The more I travel, the more war wounds I seem to find.”

“Ryuuen-sama’s sacrifice helped to protect Kounan, in the end.” The girl said simply. “But yes. It’s a loss that’s hard to bear for any family. Even for us, as staff — knowing that he won’t ride up on his horse any more with some crazy idea or request… it sobers you. War is a terrible thing, truly. I hope we never see another.”

“Me too.” Anzu agreed fervently, and her mind flitted to the conversation she had heard on the mountainside between Chichiri and Tasuki before the sacking of the village. “Well, thank you. I… I’ll go and check out some other places.”

She bowed her head, then turned on her heel, hurrying down one of the side alleys as she made her way through premises owned by wood-turners, glass-blowers and sundry other trades. At odd intervals she stopped, asking whether or not anyone had seen the monk or the bandit, but at each attempt she came up empty.

At length she sighed, leaning up against the wall that divided two of Eiyou’s less well kept streets as she contemplated her lack of success.

“Where the hell are they?” She murmured. “I was sure they’d come to Eiyou — was I jumping to conclusions? Or is it just that they’re looking in a place I haven’t thought of — something only a Suzaku warrior would know?”

“Well, well, you’re a pretty kind of girl to be walking these streets.”

A brusque male voice startled her from her reverie and she glanced up, heart sinking as she took in the man that approached her, a confident, half-drunken swagger to his step as he leered at her greedily. She cursed, her body tensing as she flicked her fingers down to the dagger concealed within her clothing.

“What is wrong with all the men in this place today?” She asked herself inwardly, as her hand closed around the hilt. “I’m not exactly dressed up — are they that desperate they’ll jump any woman who walks by? Or is it just my unlucky day?”

“You’re not very talkative. That’s good. I like women who don’t make a fuss.” The man seemed amused by her sudden discomfort, and out of the corner of her eye Anzu was aware of two other men

emerging from the darkness, one with a strip of fabric tied roughly over a damaged eye, and the other heavy-set, his huge paunch hanging over his belt in a way that made the young girl feel quite queasy.

“I don’t care what kind of woman you like. I’m taken.” Anzu pulled her dagger, narrowing her gaze as she waved it warningly in front of her face. Backed up against the wall, she knew she was in trouble, and there would be no vaulting these men. Unless she could somehow take them off guard, she was in real danger, and she swallowed hard, attempting to inch towards the end of the passageway as she did so.

The first man laughed.

“Taken, are we?” He asked, looming over her as he knocked the dagger easily from her grip. He placed thick hands against the wall, flanking her on either side and preventing her from moving. “Well, let’s see. What do you have that I might like, huh? If you’re going to buy your way out of your little fix, you’d better have a good offer.”

“I don’t have any money, so leave me alone!” Anzu somehow managed to wriggle out from underneath his grasp, edging back towards the end of the street, but just as she thought she’d escaped, she found herself colliding with something thick and hard and turning in horror, she registered the presence of a fourth man immediately behind her. He grinned at her through gapped teeth, his bony fingers sliding around her arms as he held her firmly in place. Though she struggled, she found herself manouevred around so that the end of the street was no longer clearly visible, and even if she managed to break free, escape would be difficult.

“You’re a sly one, but there are more of us than there are of you.” The first man, who was clearly the leader, told her evenly. “I won’t kill you, if you’re good. And if you don’t have any money, then I guess we’ll just take you instead. You’re pretty enough, and I’m sure there must be someone willing to spend coin on you — after we’ve had our way with you.”

“What do you mean?” Anzu’s eyes widened, and the man laughed.

“Well, and you aren’t from these parts, I can tell.” He reflected. “We’re slave traders, honey. Do you know what that means?”

Anzu’s brows knitted together, and a cold look glittered in her eyes. She jerked her head down towards the bony man’s arm, biting him firmly and he let out a yell, loosening his grasp.

“I know exactly what it’s like to be bought and sold and I am not

someone's property!" She exclaimed. "I told you once, leave me alone! You do not want to be messing with me. I have friends in powerful places and if anything happens to me…"

"Friends? In powerful places? Dressed like that?" The leader advanced on her, and Anzu took a step backwards. "Don't make me laugh. You're nothing. Just another girl walking Eiyou's streets — don't think we're stupid, just because we act outside the law."

"That's not why I think you're stupid." Anzu shot back, gauging the distance between her tormentors as she did so. "I think you're stupid because you think you've got me trapped here. I'll show you what kind of a girl I am, and why I don't get hurt by idiots like you. Thanks for lining up for me so nicely — I'll be out of here now."

She narrowed her gaze, making one last calculation, then she launched herself into the air, reaching out to spot herself off the shoulders of the startled leader as she leapt above his companions, landing neatly on the ground below, within inches of the busy street beyond.

"I'm a circus performer." She told them, as she retrieved her dagger, casting them a self-righteous look. "And it's hard to keep me in one place for any amount of time."

She turned to make her escape, but as she did so, something came flying through the air towards her, and before she could react, it caught her across the side of her head, making her stumble and fall headlong to the dusty ground. Dazed, she heard the clatter of the object as it landed beside her, and somewhere in her head she registered the fact that one of the slave traders had flung his weapon hilt-first in her direction, his aim carefully designed to bring her down without killing her.

"And we're professionals, musume-chan." The leader's shadow loomed over her. "As you're about to find out."

"Stand down at once!"

A fresh voice jerked through Anzu's jolted senses at that moment, and there was an exclamation from her would be captor as his shadow moved away from her body. She struggled to pull herself into a sitting position, and as she did so, she caught sight of the cause of the hesitation, her heart catching in her throat as she registered the stranger that had unexpectedly come to her rescue. He was young — perhaps Genrou's age, she guessed, and both tall and elegant in his bearing, with thick, dark hair falling long and loose over his shoulders and down his back. He was dressed in civilian wear, but he had the

bearing of a soldier, and somehow, Anzu knew that this man had seen his fair share of conflict in his time. In his hand he held a gleaming sword, the hilt glinting red and gold in the flickering sunlight, and his expression was one of both outrage and determination as he raised his weapon slowly.

“I said to stand down.” He said softly. “Leave the girl alone, you savages. What kind of men are you, anyway, to treat a woman that way?”

“Who do you think you are, pretty boy? Some kind of guardian angel?” The trader snorted, bunching his fists as if preparing to fight, but the stranger did not falter or flinch as the men advanced.

“Leave this place or I will kill you.” he said evenly. “Such conduct towards a woman is unforgivable, and I will not allow it to happen.”

The leader launched himself at the stranger, who reacted quickly, raising his sword and bringing the flat of the blade down against the man’s skin. It had been a warning blow, but the slave trader screamed, clutching at his arm as it burned red and blistered at the weapon’s touch.

“I warned you once. Leave this place.” The stranger said quietly. “I do not wish to harm you, but if you do not leave this girl in peace, I will be forced to act.”

“He burned my arm! His sword is from the devil — it burned my arm!” Unnerved, the leader took a step back. “We’re pulling out of here — lads, follow me!”

Pushing past Anzu and her mysterious rescuer, the group of men fled the scene, and once they were gone, the man sighed, sheathing his sword and holding out his hand to pull Anzu to her feet.

“The streets are full of such people. It’s quite depressing.” He said sadly, as Anzu accepted his gesture, brushing down her clothes as she sent him a grateful smile.

“Thank you.” She said sincerely. “It was silly of me to let myself get caught like that — I probably owe you my life.”

“I’m glad to have been of help.” The man said simply. “You’re most welcome.”

He returned the smile with one of his own, and Anzu was struck once again by the beauty in the individual that stood before her.

“What is your name?” Seeing her gaze, her companion tilted his head, eying her curiously.

“Oh. Anzu.” Anzu blushed. “I’m sorry. I should have said that before.”

“I see.” The man pursed his lips. “Anzu. So your name is apricot, like the fruit?”

“Yes. Just like that.” Anzu agreed. “And you? I should know who I’m thanking… who saved my life.”

The man faltered, and a troubled look touched his expression.

“Is something wrong?” Anzu asked softly. The man shrugged.

“I am… not entirely sure how to answer that question.” He hazarded. “It may sound strange to you, but I am not… completely sure what my true name is.”

“Oh.” Anzu looked non-plussed. “How come? Did something happen?”

“I wish I knew that too.” The man leant up against the wall, and Anzu noted that he looked tired and drawn, something that he had not seemed when he had so easily come to her rescue. “I have had many dreams… or things which seem like dreams. But I am not sure what they all mean. I think… no, I am sure that I fought a battle — that I was involved in conflict, wherever I was before. But I remember little that makes any sense. I realise it sounds strange — but I’m sorry. I have no other answer to give.”

“You saved me, even though you have enough troubles of your own.” Anzu shook her head. “You don’t need to apologise to me for anything.”

The man smiled.

“You have a kind heart. I am glad I could help you.” He admitted. “I feel like, for once, I have done something worthwhile.”

“I’m sure you’ve done a lot of things.” As they stepped out into the sunshine, Anzu cast him a sidelong glance. “If you fought for your country, you must have done much to help Kounan. Right?”

“War is so full of death and pain. Whenever I close my eyes, I see those things.” The man admitted. “I don’t know that they are deeds to be proud of.”

“That’s sad.” Anzu sighed. “I wish I could help you, too. Isn’t there anything you remember at all?”

“Last night, I think I went somewhere that was once familiar to me.” The man said thoughtfully. “A man called me by a name, but…

but when I left there — when I slept… I saw another face. A woman's face. I think she was my mother. And… and she called me Seishuku. I think… that might be my name. Even though the man called me otherwise — I think… I am pretty sure… she was my mother."

"Seishuku, huh?" Anzu dimpled. "All right. Then that's a start, at least."

"You should not trouble yourself with my problems." Seishuku told her firmly. "You must have your own errand in the city, Anzu-san, before those men accosted you."

"Yes." Anzu's eyes opened wide as she remembered. "Yes, I do. I was searching for someone. For… for someone important, actually."

She pinkened.

"I love him, even though I don't think he loves me." She said with a sigh. "But he's looking for friends of his, and I… I wanted to help. But we were seperated — well, no, that's not entirely true. But I came to Eiyou because I thought I might be able to find him, and help him with his search."

"I see." The Seishuku looked thoughtful. "Then allow me to accompany you while you search. With the streets so violent, I would not like you to get hurt."

"You don't have to do that." Anzu shook her head hastily. "You must have enough on your plate, trying to remember who you are and where you came from."

"In truth, I would relish the company, and the opportunity not to think about those things." Seishuku admitted ruefully. "I do not know what is memory and what is dream at present. It would be a welcome relief to have something else to put my mind to — that is, if you do not object to my company. I give you my word that I will not harm you."

"I believed that, anyway." Anzu assured him. "And all right. If you feel that way — then thank you. I hope it won't take too long — but I did think they'd come here, and so far I haven't found them at all."

"What is your friend called, may I ask?"

"Genrou." Anzu nodded. "His name is Genrou. Well, it's a nickname really. His true name is Shun'u. But he's known as Genrou."

"Genrou." Seishuku digested this. "And this man is someone you love?"

“Yes.” Anzu pinkened again. “Very much.”

“Then I shall help you find him.” Seishuku said firmly. “I feel sure that once, I had such a person — though the recollection is so fleeting and brief I may have imagined her altogether. But the thought of her — be she real or fantasy — makes me wish I could be with her. If I can help you to find the one you love, I think it might help to heal my own wounds.”

“It must be tough to go to war and not know when you come back if you have someone waiting for you.” Anzu said gently. “Thank you, Seishuku-san. And… and one other thing?”

“Yes?” The soldier looked startled, eying her curiously.

“Will you show me how to hold a sword like you?” Anzu looked embarrassed. “I… I want to be able to defend myself next time, only I really don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Wield a sword?” Seishuku looked taken aback. Then he smiled, and for a moment something lit up his tired eyes, making them appear almost golden in hue. He nodded.

“Of course.” He agreed. “If that is what you wish, it would be my pleasure.”

It felt like he had been running forever, and yet, no matter how far he went, there still seemed to be no escape.

As he reached the bank of the swift-flowing river that ran to the south of the town, Nuriko stumbled to his knees, struggling to draw breath and calm his racing, pulsing senses. He did not know how far he had come, or how many fields or villages behind him Tamatama and the little girl with the blue ball were. In that instant, however, it was enough of a challenge for him not to lose his grip completely, as once more the images of his sister’s death flooded through his brain.

“Kourin.” He whispered, slipping his hands into the racing current and splashing water on his face. “How could I have forgotten… how could I have not realised…”

“*Oniichan*?”

The voice echoed out of the surrounding hills, and for a moment Nuriko tensed, as if preparing to suffer another onslaught of dark images. But, as he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror, he caught his breath in his throat. His own features flickered and blurred, almost ghostly and translucent against the ripples of the cool, clear

water, as if he were not really there. But it was not that which had drawn his attention, but rather, the image of the little girl who stood at his right hand.

He started, wheeling around, half expecting it to be another delusion, and almost fearing what he would see. There was nothing there, however, and he drew a breath, flopping back onto the grass as he muttered a curse under his breath.

“I’m going mad. If I’m not dead, I’m definitely crackers.” He murmured. “Tamatama should’ve left me to travel on my own, because right now I’m nothing but a basket case and a burden for him. And now I don’t even know where I am, which is just perfect. Someone with barely any memory in a field in the middle of nowhere, hallucinating images of a little girl’s death. Isn’t anyone gonna give me a break up there? I thought I was meant to be one of those Suzaku whatever it was people. If that’s true, why the hell am I going through all of this!”

Tears touched his cheeks, and he closed his eyes, allowing them to roll down onto the grass beneath his head.

“I just want to stop it.” He admitted. “Whatever happened to me, to make me like this — I want to find out and fix it. Somehow. Because I can’t keep living this way.”

“*Oniichan Don’t cry*.”

The voice came again, and Nuriko flinched, screwing up his eyes as if to ward against any further delusions. None came, however, and he almost thought he felt the faint touch of someone dashing his tears away. He bit his lip, opening his eyes cautiously and almost crying out in surprise and alarm as he registered the petite figure bending over him.

At his surprise, she stood back, offering him a beatific smile, and Nuriko’s eyes opened wide with astonishment and disbelief.

“Kou… rin?” He whispered. The young girl’s smile widened and she nodded, skipping around his body as she sat at his other side, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it. Her touch was light, barely more than a brush against his skin, yet something in it’s gentleness gave the troubled Seishi strength. He stared up at her in wonder, for a moment robbed of speech, and seeing his expression, Kourin laughed, the sound of her carefree giggles carrying on the air like ghostly fairy music.

“You look funny, Oniichan.” She reproached him gently. “What is

it? Don't you want to see me?"

"I… I didn't know that I could." Nuriko gathered himself hurriedly. "Are you… another delusion?"

"I'm not a delusion." The child put her hands on her hips. "You're saying mean things now — don't be silly. I'm really here. And I want to talk to you. I haven't… not for a long time. But now I want to. And I can."

"All right." Nuriko pulled himself into a sitting position. "Talk to me. Tell me how it's possible that you're really Kourin, in front of me, after so long? You… you died, didn't you? You… the cart… you really *did* die that day, didn't you? My memory — it isn't false?"

"It's not false." Kourin shook her head, and for a moment she looked sad. "I'm sorry, Oniichan. I shouldn't have left you. It hurt you, I know… and I didn't want to. I'm sorry for making you cry so much — I really am."

"It wasn't your fault!" Nuriko's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "If I'd seen the horse — if the driver had been concentrating — it was an accident, not something you did. Kourin, I cried because I missed you, that's all. I didn't know… I didn't want to carry on without you."

"I know." There was a moment of silence, then Kourin sighed.

"Oniichan, you know that I couldn't talk to you before this." She said slowly. "I tried, once before, but it wasn't possible, then. Do you remember that? The last time you saw me? Do you remember anything about it at all?"

Nuriko frowned, then slowly, light dawned in his dark eyes, making him all of a sudden appear more animated and real than he had done up to that point. He nodded.

"In the mountains, in Hokkan." He whispered. "When I…"

"When you died." Kourin agreed simply. "I was coming then, to speak to you. To bring you with me — that's why I came. You said my name, so I thought that you knew. But then your friends… they were there. And I couldn't… I couldn't reach you. You… you stayed with them, and I didn't know how to change that. Even though you were dead — you stayed."

She bit her lip, squeezing his hand again.

"You had to be Nuriko for a long time, even when you died." She added. "But now you… you shouldn't be here. I've waited for you to

finish being Nuriko, you know. I didn't want to leave you without seeing you and telling you that I was sorry. And that… that you should know it wasn't your fault. But I had to wait — and now… now something's wrong, and it worried me."

"I… really am dead, then?" Nuriko glanced at his hands. "My memories are right — I did die in Hokkan at the hands of that monster Ashitare?"

"Yes, Oniichan. You did." Kourin nodded. "You're one of Suzaku's chosen, so your spirit is strong… but you could only see me then because you were on the edge of living and dying. Like now. You're in the middle."

She shifted closer to him on the grass, leaning against his body, and Nuriko felt a sense of warmth run through him at her touch.

"You should have been born again, Oniichan, but you haven't and it's all because of me." She said chokily, and Nuriko was horrified to see the spectral tears glittering on her lashes. "You can't forgive yourself, so you can't move on. And I'm sorry, Ryuuen-nii. I'm sorry…"

"Kourin, stop it. Stop saying that." Nuriko said firmly, shaking his head as he felt something flicker and stir inside of his heart. "Listen. It's nothing you have to say sorry for. I… I made a decision — lots of decisions. And I don't know if they were right or wrong. But none of them were your fault. If anyone was to blame, it was me. All right? Not you."

Kourin just eyed him sadly, and made no comment.

"You've really been waiting for me, all this time?" Nuriko hazarded. Slowly the little girl nodded.

"You could have been reborn, you know. You could already have a life, with a family and more."

Kourin shook her head from side to side, wisps of silky hair bobbing against her cheeks as she did so.

"Not without you." She said simply. "You're my Oniichan. And we'll always be together. Isn't that what you said?"

A faint glimmer of light surfaced in Nuriko's clouded eyes and he nodded, putting his hand absently to the place on his chest where the willow mark burned brightly beneath his clothing.

"You really were here all the time, inside of me." He murmured. "With me through everything, just like I wanted you to be. I didn't

know, but you were there. All the time."

"Yes." Kourin dimpled, and her solemnity was gone in an instant. "And when you're reborn, Oniichan, we'll still be together. I promised it, when I couldn't stop you crying. That I'd wait for you, and we'd go together. So you have to be okay and stop blaming yourself for me and for the other girl. Byakuren. She doesn't blame you either — nobody blames you. You're a hero, Ryuuen-nii. To everyone. And especially to me. Always."

"Kourin." Fresh tears flooded down Nuriko's face at this and he hugged his sister tightly in his arms, half afraid that she might vanish again at any moment. Then he gazed up sharply, as realisation dawned across his dulled senses.

"Did you come to get me? Is that why you're here?" He asked softly. Kourin looked troubled, and she shook her head.

"I want to, but I can't." She admitted. "Something's wrong, and I don't know why, but something is stopping you from coming with me."

"Something… like a demon?" Nuriko's eyes narrowed. "We've tackled one of those before — is it magic, stopping me from being reborn? Because, little by little, what you say is stirring memories inside of me. I'm sure… no, I'm pretty certain that the last thing that happened before I woke up in Yukigase was Taiitsukun telling me that I was about to be reborn into a new life — one of my choosing. But… here I am. Something blocked me. That's what you're telling me too, isn't it? That something is preventing the Suzaku Shichi Seishi from starting over."

Kourin nodded her head.

"And until it's fixed, I can't take you with me." She said regretfully. "Neither of us can be reborn at all, unless everything is made better."

Nuriko got to his feet, reaching out to touch his sister on the head.

"I'm a lot taller than you, now. And quite as pretty as you would have been." He said with a smile, a faint sense of his old mischief flaring in his eyes as he looked down on her. "And I want to come with you, more than anything. Now that I know you're there, and not just in my imagination or my nightmares. But Kourin, I'm still Nuriko right now, aren't I? I'm still… still Ryuuen, too. There must be a reason why I've been prevented from passing over that line — Nuriko must still be needed — somehow. And if that's true, and something bad is causing this, then I… I need to know what. Maybe it's

something I can resolve — maybe I can help.”

“And then you’d come with me? You wouldn’t be afraid?” Kourin looked hopeful. “You’d come with me and we’d be together again, like always?”

“I’m not afraid of dying again — especially not now.” Nuriko shook his head. “But living this half-life forever — I don’t want that. Even as a spirit, defending Miaka, I had more life in me than I have had lately. But that’s got to change. Whatever’s wrong with me — whatever’s wrong with the mechanisms of this world — I have to get a hold on it all and try and sort it out. That’s my duty as Nuriko, after all. My last duty, if you like.”

He glanced at his sister, then offered her a wink.

“My final fling for Kounan, before taking my new life.” He added.

“I’m glad we had this talk, Oniichan.” Kourin’s features lit up in a pretty smile. “Your friend is coming, so I have to go. But I’ll be waiting, just like I’ve always been. I’ll be waiting for you, brother. I promise!”

Even as her last words echoed out around him, Nuriko felt the girl’s presence waning and as she disappeared completely, he sank back onto the grass, dazed and yet uplifted by the brief experience.

“Kourin!” Tamatama’s yell broke his reverie and he turned, seeing the transvestite hurrying towards him, skirts flying and his face red as he hurried to reach his friend. Despite himself, something about the sight of this bulky man clad in fine women’s clothing, panting and puffing across the grass towards him struck the Seishi as hilariously funny, and before he knew what he was doing he had burst out laughing, collapsing onto the ground as he gave way to his sudden flood of mirth. Tamatama halted, staring at him in confusion for a moment. Then he too began laughing, dropping down onto the grass with a heavy, breathless thump.

“I don’t know what we’re laughing at, but I thought it was a good sign, so I’m humouring you.” He said blandly, as Nuriko paused for breath, sending his companion into more gurgles. “When you ran off like that, I was worried, Kourin — but unless you’ve gone crazy or hysterical on me, I think I was worrying needlessly. Are you all right? You seem more like yourself all of a sudden.”

“I feel… more like myself.” Nuriko admitted. “I just…”

He paused, then shook his head.

“Tamatama, please don’t call me Kourin any more.” He said softly. “It… it isn’t my name. You can call me Ryuuen, or Nuriko. I don’t mind which one. But Kourin is… my sister. And I know now that she’s really still here — she’s with me. I *can’t* take over her life — I can’t become her. So… please. Not Kourin. Not any more.”

“Does that mean you really have given up being a girl, then?” Tamatama asked. Nuriko shrugged.

“I don’t really know, to be honest with you. But it doesn’t matter either way, because I’m not going to be here very long.” He said cryptically.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing important.” Nuriko flicked his fingers, dismissing it. “When I left the town, I didn’t know where I was going. Just away — away from the memory it stirred up inside me. That was how she died, and saving Shian from that horse… It reminded me. It came over me suddenly — like a shock of cold water — and I had to get out of there.”

“And now?”

“It might sound mad, but I think… I think I spoke to my sister. Properly. Face to face.” Nuriko’s expression became serious. “I know its strange, but she was right here in front of me and I could feel her being here — that it was more than imagination. For so long I’ve wanted to see her — to speak to her, to tell her things. And there she was. After all these years, I could finally talk to my sister.”

He eyed his companion ruefully.

“You probably think it was another delusion, or a dream.” He added. “But I don’t think it was. I believe she was here. And… and that’s why I feel better. Because at last I think… I think I understand.”

He got to his feet, hauling his brawny companion up with a hefty tug of his wrist.

“Come on.” He added. “We still need to get to Eiyou. My memories are returning, but I have another reason to go there now.”

“Which is?” Tamatama eyed him curiously.

“I have to find the others. My friends.” Nuriko said simply. “Something is wrong in Kounan and I think my power is needed. So that’s the new plan. We’re going to find the Suzaku Shichi Seishi, and as ever, we’re going to save the world.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

"It's been a long time since I came to Eiyou."

As Anzu and her companion walked through the streets of the city, she smiled, her sharp eyes taking in the street performers that lined one of the thoroughfares leading to the centre of town. "They remind me of the last time I was here… with my sister, performing like that."

"So you're a street performer by trade, then?" Seishuku eyed her curiously. Anzu shrugged, shaking her head.

"Not now, I don't suppose. Actually, I was with a circus troupe for a long time, and then my sister and I — we did some solo performances in Sairou." She replied. Her eyes shadowed, and she frowned. "But Karin died there, and so I came back here to find an old friend. Well, more than an old friend — at least to me."

"This Genrou, correct?" Seishuku's eyes softened, and Anzu was struck once again by the compassion of this stranger who had come from nowhere to rescue her, even despite his own turmoil. She nodded.

"That's right." She agreed. "Genrou."

"There are so very many people in the city today." Seishuku reflected. He frowned, and Anzu saw a haunted expression cross his face. "For some reason, I have the sense that… that I have not walked through the centre of this city in some time, either. In fact, that it is something I seldom do. It is pleasant, though, to take in the surroundings and the atmosphere and appreciate it just for what it is. It is a very bustling city, full of life and people. I like that. It's not… silent."

Anzu's brows knitted at this unusual observation, and she looked at the crowded streets anew.

"Most people would get a headache if they listened to so many people chattering and yelling all day long." She observed. "But not you, huh?"

"I do not like silence." Seishuku shook his head. "It implies solitude, and I have no liking for that, either. Being alone with one's demons — no, I do not like it at all."

He sighed, and Anzu wondered for a moment what was going through his mind. Then he seemed to shake himself from his reverie, offering her a smile.

“But I am sorry. I am not helping you to find your friend, am I, by making such negative observations.”

“It is nice to have company.” Anzu told him with a grin. “And it’s all right. With so many people… I’m not sure how I’m going to spot him, to be honest. Even though he’s distinctive to look at — there’s so much going on here.”

“Perhaps if you were to describe your friend to me, then two pairs of eyes may prove more successful than one.” Seishuku suggested, and Anzu nodded, looking sheepish at his suggestion.

“I should have done that already.” She acknowledged. “I’m sorry… I guess it would help if you knew who I was looking for.”

“It would.” Seishuku’s eyes lit up once more, and Anzu’s smile widened.

“Well, Genrou’s tall.” She said slowly. “He’s sturdy and strong — he’s a mountain man, so he has to be. He has red hair — like the flames of a fire — and everyone says he looks like a wolf. He does, too, in a sense, I suppose. That’s how he got his nickname, I think. He tends to dress quite showily — and he carries a metal harisen with him all of the time, too — for defence purposes.”

She gestured to her companion.

“I think he must be the same age as you.” She added. “Or thereabouts.”

Then she frowned, taking in the expression on the young soldier’s face.

“Or thereabouts.” Seishuku murmured. “Flame haired, from the mountains…”

He faltered, and to Anzu’s horror, a tear trickled down his cheek.

“Seishuku-san?” She exclaimed. “Seishuku-san, what’s wrong? Did I say something that I shouldn’t have… please, tell me what’s wrong?”

Seishuku closed his eyes, dashing away the tears as he fought to regain his composure.

“I’m sorry. You have done nothing wrong.” He said slowly. “It’s just — your words — they remind me of… a battle. Of smoke spreading into the sky and a man… a man with red hair, wielding a sword…”

He faltered, opening his eyes to meet Anzu's concerned gaze.

"I'm sorry." He said again. "I did not mean to…"

He did not finish his sentence, and Anzu bit her lip, her heart clenching inside of her as she took in the look of sadness in her companion's beautiful eyes. Slowly she shook her head.

"This time it's me who should apologise, for stirring an unpleasant memory." She said categorically.

"Unpleasant memories seem to be the only ones I have, at present." Seishuku rubbed his temples. "Perhaps they are all I do have. I don't know."

For a while they walked in silence, though as she sent him a sidelong glance, Anzu could tell that he was troubled by the fleeting recollections that had woken in his brain. His eyes remained clouded and uncertain, as if struggling to put the pieces of something together, and at length she sighed, taking him by the hand and leading him away from the main street.

"I've upset you, and you look all in." She said softly. "Let's sit here a while, all right? I've canvassed most areas of the city since I arrived, as it is. It won't hurt to stand still for a while… after all, two moving targets are less likely to collide than if one of them stops still."

"Are you sure?" Seishuku looked apprehensive. "I don't want to prove a burden for you, Anzu-san. You've shown me kindness, and I do not wish to cause you trouble in return."

"You're the one who saved my life." Anzu shook her head. "So it's all right. Really. To be honest — I'm kind of tired, too."

"Well, if you are sure." Seishuku shrugged, dropping down onto the ground beneath the spreading branches of a tree. They had reached the outskirts of Eiyou by this time, and there were fewer people around, but somehow Anzu felt secure in the company of her mysterious rescuer. She drew her knees up to her chest, contemplating.

"Genrou's not here on his own." She said pensively. "His sister and his friend are with him. His friend's a monk — well, I think he's a sorcerer, actually. I wonder, if I was to really concentrate on finding them, whether he'd be able to find me? I should have thought of that before — but with everything that happened, it didn't occur to me."

"A sorcerer?" Seishuku looked stricken. Anzu nodded in surprise, then smiled as she realised what her companion must be thinking.

“Oh, not that kind of sorcerer. I mean, he doesn’t do bad magic or curses.” She assured him. “But he does have strong spiritual magic.”

“I see.” Seishuku’s brow creased as he digested her words. He sat back against the trunk of the tree, gazing up at the clouds as he did so.

“So if you were to concentrate on him, he would find you?”

“Maybe. He’d find Genrou, I know that. But I don’t know about me.”

“Still, he must be very powerful, if he can pick one person out of a crowd in that way.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Anzu agreed. Seishuku closed his eyes, and Anzu was once more aware of the tired air her companion had.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” She asked softly. “You look very pale all of a sudden… are you ill?”

“I don’t think so.” Seishuku said slowly. “But your words, they… they stir something inside of me. I do not know what… and it is frustrating me. That’s all.”

“Then let’s talk about something else.” Anzu suggested. “You must remember other things. You said you thought you dreamed about your mother — then you have a family, who must be looking for you?”

“My mother is dead.” Seishuku said gravely. “That was what I dreamed — her speaking to me, as she left this world.”

“Your father, then?”

“I do not know.” Seishuku admitted.

“I think he must have been someone well thought of.” Anzu decided, and Seishuku looked startled.

“What do you mean?”

“You speak so nicely, and you came to my rescue without a second thought.” Anzu blushed as she realised how incoherent her observations sounded out loud. “That’s all. You must have come from a good background, Seishuku-san.”

“Does it matter, when all you can remember is blood and battle and a woman you can’t even define as real begging you to come back to her?” Tears glittered in Seishuku’s eyes once more at this, and he sighed.

“No, I’m sorry. I have no right to trouble you with my affairs. Forgive me, Anzu-san.”

He leant forward, rubbing his temples, and as he did so, his thick mane of hair fell forward, revealing for the first time the man's neck and shoulders. Anzu, who had been on the verge of speaking, stopped dead as she saw something glittering through her companion's skin, and her eyes widened as she registered what it was.

"The star of Suzaku." She whispered, all colour draining from her face as she shuffled instinctively away from her companion. "You… you… you're *Hotohori*!"

Seishuku's head jerked up at this, and he stared at her, bewildered by her sudden change in demeanour.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You… the star… you were the one in… in Genrou's village." Anzu swallowed hard, as Kouji's advice about trusting people echoed once more in her head. "You… Hotohori… the sign of Suzaku!"

"Hotohori?" Seishuku's expression remained blank, then he frowned.

"I don't understand." He admitted. "But the man I… I may have spoken to last night — he said that word when speaking about the stars. Constellations in the southern sky… is it that of which you speak?"

Anzu eyed him warily.

"Last night, you burnt down a village." She murmured, and horror and alarm flickered in Seishuku's expression. "Like a demon wielding fire, you destroyed the homes of innocent people and left them to fend for themselves. If not for Genrou and Chichiri and the Reikaku-zan bandits, people would have died. How can you forget something like that? How can you lie to me and pretend you want to help me, when last night you did something like that?"

Hotohori blanched at her tones, shaking his head slowly.

"I would not…" He murmured faintly. "I do not… I do not understand."

At his faltering tones, Anzu sent him a cautious look, noticing that the expression on his face seemed to be one of genuine bewilderment. She frowned, biting her lip hard enough to taste blood on her tongue.

"Tell me what you remember last night." She said softly. "What other dreams did you have, last night?"

"Before I was standing looking up at the stars, and speaking to a

man in armour?" Seishuku asked. Anzu nodded, and Seishuku flinched, pain in his eyes.

"I was riding my horse." He whispered. "There was a man… a man dressed in blue and silver, with cold eyes and fair hair. He wore the crest of a dragon on his helmet… and there was blood and death all around. So many people suffering, and I wanted… I wanted to stop him. I had to stop him. To protect… to protect… Oh, I don't know! I can't remember — it was a dream!"

A note of anguish touched his tones, and Anzu felt a pang of guilt pierce her heart. She sighed, impulsively hugging him as his tears rolled down his cheeks once more.

"I'm sorry. You really *don't* remember, do you?" She murmured. "You saved my life and I've frightened you by yelling at you about something you know nothing about."

"But…" The man swallowed hard, then, "Chi… chiri? Is he… the sorcerer friend of whom you spoke?"

"Yes." Anzu nodded. "That's right. Then… you remember him? You really *are* Hotohori, aren't you? I mean… you really are Saihitei-sama… however impossible that might be."

"Saihitei…" Seishuku faltered. "That is what the man called me last night. But I was sure it was a dream — a delusion. Because Saihitei is a dead man, and the whole encounter seems so vague in my mind as if I imagined it all — so much in my mind seems that way at present. Besides, if Saihitei is dead, how is it that I am here, talking to you?"

He held out his hands, glancing at them, then up at her.

"I am not dead — *am* I?"

"I… don't know." Anzu admitted. "I really don't, and that's the truth… it might have something to do with magic, and Chichiri is probably the only one who might be able to tell you for sure. But if you are Hotohori, then it's you that Genrou and Chichiri are looking for. Genrou's also known as Tasuki… he and Chichiri are Suzaku warriors. Just like you are. They have red marks, like the one you have on your neck."

"On my neck…?" Hotohori's fingers slipped absently to his throat, and he frowned. "I… I think… maybe I remember."

He glanced at his hands, then carefully he traced the characters for his name in the dirt.

"Seishuku." He murmured. "That was what my mother called me.

In my dream, that was my name. And this word, this way of writing it — that's why I was so sure. But… but… but maybe I'm wrong. Anzu-san… this… this is the character for star, is it not? The one you see on my neck? And this…"

"This can be read as '*Hotohori*'." Anzu nodded her head slowly. "Seishuku and Hotohori are written the same way. I should have realised it before… but I didn't expect…"

She looked ashamed.

"After last night, I thought Hotohori must have become some kind of a demon, or something." She admitted. "But you… you're kind and good, I do believe that. And you helped me. So I… I was wrong. I'm sorry. I'm not afraid of you, I promise. Whatever happened last night — I don't believe it was your fault."

"I do not remember a village." Hotohori admitted, his expression troubled. "Truly, I do not. But your words have brought flashes of memory to me. The man on the horse, wielding his sword — perhaps I do know him by that name. Tasuki, you said… perhaps I do. And Chichiri… the sorcerer. He pierced my dreams last night — in the midst of all the fighting there was this glow of light and I felt someone was with me. It was just for a second, but when you spoke of magic, I felt it inside of me. Like he broke through my nightmare. Somehow."

"Genrou and Chichiri left Reikaku-zan to come and track you down. To help you, not hurt you — you were once their close friend and Chichiri at least is very worried about you." Anzu said softly. "If you are Hotohori, Chichiri will find you more easily than he will me. Please, will you try and focus all your strength on that fact? I know you're tired and confused, but if he helped you last night…"

"I… will try." Hotohori agreed haltingly. "Although if I have done some awful deed to an innocent village, they may no longer consider me a friend."

"I won't let either of them hurt you. I promise. I owe you that for helping me." Anzu assured him. "Besides, I don't think they will. I think they want to find you because they're concerned, not because they're angry. And because they're worried something is going to happen in Kounan. I don't know what — but it might be that it's serious. I think that's why you're here, Sei… Sai… *Hotohori*-sama. Because you're one of Suzaku's chosen, and… and Kounan needs you."

Hotohori sighed, then he nodded his head.

"Then I must do what I must do." He said softly. "Even though I do

not distinctly remember, and though I am unsure I am much use to anyone in this condition — I will do what I can. If for no other reason than to help you find your friends."

"Hotohori!"

As Chichiri and his companions left the royal palace, the monk stopped dead in the middle of the street, letting out an exclamation as he felt something rip through his senses, strong and clear and more focused than any of the signals he had detected so far. Tasuki, who had not been paying much attention, narrowly missed walking into the back of his friend, and he grabbed the monk by the shoulders, giving him a shake.

"Will you not do that, dammit?" He demanded. "What's biting you now? Have you got a hold of the Emperor's ghost?"

"Not a ghost. A physical being." Chichiri corrected. "And yes. Yes. I… I know where he is. It's suddenly a lot less vague than it was last night — almost as if…"

He frowned, shaking his head.

"It could be a trap." He reflected slowly. "Because from sensing nothing at all, it almost seems like he's trying to locate me now. That he's putting energy into making sure I know where he is."

"So what if it is?" Tasuki brushed his fingers against the end of his tessen. "There are two of us and one of him, and he's a walking corpse. We can take him."

"I wasn't thinking of us. The city is busy, and innocent people may get hurt." Chichiri said cautiously. "And Aidou-san is with us, also, don't forget. We don't want to put her in danger — do we?"

"I'm not afraid." Aidou spoke up for herself this time, a frown touching her lips. "If this is the guy who burned down my village, and he's still looking for trouble, he may find he gets it."

"Oh boy… now I see the family resemblance." Chichiri's lips twitched into a rueful smile. "All right, then. We'll go, you know? I know where he is, roughly. But if it looks like he wants a fight, Tasuki, let's make sure that we don't witness a second burning settlement in as many days, all right? We have no way of knowing what kind of state his mind is in at the moment."

"What do you mean, family resemblance?" Tasuki glanced at Aidou, then back at the monk, raising an eyebrow.

“It doesn’t matter.” Chichiri grinned, tightening his grip on his *shakujou* as he swept his *kesa* off his shoulders, setting it down on the ground. “And we’ll go this way, this time. I’m using the *kasa* too often as it is.”

“Just don’t land us in a tree.” Tasuki stepped cautiously onto the blue patterned cloak, and after a moment, Aidou followed his example. Chichiri shrugged.

“I’ll do my best, you know.” He said unconcernedly. “But that’s part of the fun of it — not knowing where you’ll end up.”

“Chichiriiiiiii!”

As the monk cast his spell, his companion let out a yell of protest, but as Chichiri focused his magic on Hotohori’s life force, they found themselves emerging at the edge of the city, surprising an old man with a rickshaw cart as they reappeared in front of him.

“Not bad, you know.” Chichiri scooped up his *kesa*, dusting it down and casting his companions a playful smile. “We’re almost right where he is — just a couple of blocks out. I’m quite impressed — I wasn’t sure I’d get us even this close, to be honest… but I can sense him quite clearly now.”

“What do you mean, you weren’t sure? *Chichiri*!” Tasuki grabbed the monk’s shirt roughly, but Chichiri laughed, pushing the irate bandit away.

“Relax.” He ordered. “I’m only playing with you — lighten up a little bit, will you?”

Tasuki frowned.

“Yeesh, what’s wrong with me today?” He demanded. Chichiri shrugged.

“Karma.” He said simply. “I told you — something in the air. You need to be on your guard against negative emotions a little more, Tasuki-kun. You’re far too open to them at the moment. I don’t know what it is, exactly — but I’m sure that something isn’t quite as it should be.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Tasuki nodded his head, glancing around him. “Where is his Highness, anyway? I mean, when you say a coupl’a blocks, you mean that, right? Not half a city away?”

“If I’m right, I think he should be somewhere over that way… towards the city perimeter.” Chichiri pointed. “I’m not that inaccurate, you know — give me a little credit for aim, at the very least. I didn’t

want to land right on top of him, just in case it was some kind of trap… I figured we'd do better having the element of surprise."

"That makes sense." Aidou reflected. "And this is definitely the man who fired our village, Chichiri-san?"

"Yes." Chichiri confirmed. "But Aidou-san, promise me you won't try and tackle him. If last night was deliberate, he could hurt you — and with the power he has as one of Suzaku's own, he could probably hurt you quite a lot. And if it was an accident — or because he's confused — he may lash out unexpectedly. Please, give me your word… neither Tasuki or I want to see anything happen to you. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you'd stay here, in the city, where it's busy and you're less likely to be in danger. We'll come back and find you once we've ascertained any danger — you have a cool head, and it might be that, if there is a risk, you'll be of more use to people here than if you were to follow us out."

Aidou's expression softened, and she nodded her head.

"All right." She agreed. "Since you put it so nicely, I'll do as you say."

Chichiri grinned, rummaging in the folds of his outfit for some coins, and holding them out to her.

"If you could find us some food, we'd both be grateful." He added. "You're far more experienced with markets than either of us, and it's getting late."

"I think I can manage that." Aidou agreed. "I won't pretend I'm not hungry, too. Just don't get yourselves killed, huh? I don't want to buy food for someone if they're not going to come back in one piece to eat it."

Chichiri chuckled, dropping the coins into her outstretched palm, and she dimpled back, turning on her heel and heading towards the still busy market stalls that were plying their wares not far ahead.

"How the hell do you do that?" As the two Suzaku Seishi made their way in the direction Chichiri had indicated, the bandit nudged him with his elbow, sending him an incredulous glance. "If I'd said that — even if I'd said it the way you did — she'd have blacked my eye or somethin'!"

"The difference is, Tasuki-kun, that you wouldn't have said it like that." Chichiri's good eye twinkled with amusement. "I told you. If you were just a little more tactful, you'd get a lot less bruised."

“I can’t help being direct. It’s just the kind of man I am.” Tasuki objected. “I give it straight, that’s all.”

“Then you should be prepared for the consequences.” Chichiri shrugged. “Sometimes truth hurts.”

Tasuki’s eyes narrowed.

“Come to think of it, where did that money come from, anyway?” He asked suspiciously. “You don’t usually carry coin like that with you. Chichiri, did you raid Reikaku-zan before we left on this little trip?”

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.” Chichiri said serenely. “It’s going to feed you, isn’t it? You shouldn’t complain.”

He paused, holding up his hands as they reached the edge of the street, and Tasuki obediently halted his stride, frowning as snippets of a conversation drifted across towards them.

“Shit.” He muttered. “*I’m* having delusions now… that girl’s hauntin’ my brain, I swear it!”

“Tasuki?” Chichiri stared at him, non-plussed, and Tasuki pulled a face.

“Anzu.” He replied. “I swear… for a moment there, I could hear her voice.”

“Well, I suppose that’s logical.” Chichiri said with a shrug, eying him with a wicked smile. “That she’d be so easily in your thoughts… you know?”

“Chichiri, if you want to be brained with a large metal fan, you’re goin’ the right way towards it.”

“You’re so sensitive about women.” Chichiri sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, you’re not hallucinating. That is Anzu’s voice — she’s here.”

“In Eiyou?” Tasuki’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “What the hell? Why is she here, of all places? Is she *stalking* me?”

“She was here before us, so that seems unlikely, you know.” Chichiri chuckled. “But since she’s here, you can come and ask her.”

“Hell, I don’t care about Anzu!” Tasuki retorted. “We’re here to find his Highness — not pander to some girl’s weird behaviour!”

“That’s not a problem.” Chichiri said evenly. “Hotohori-sama is with her.”

“*What*?” Tasuki looked flawed, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“Seems your girl has found our lost stray before we did. I’m impressed.” He reflected.

“*She is not my damn girl*!” Tasuki exclaimed, sending a couple of scavenging birds fluttering into the sky at his yell, screeching raucously in protest at the sudden disturbance.

“So much for the element of surprise.” Chichiri shook his head in resignation, gesturing for his friend to follow him across the uneven terrain towards the source of the voices. “Although I think it’s all right, you know? If Anzu is with him, and she’s all right — I think maybe His Highness has come back to himself, at least somewhat.”

“He’d damn well better have done.” Tasuki said grimly. “Dammit, is that girl stupid? She knows he fired a village, so what, she goes looking for him, on her own?”

“The levels people will go to for true love.” Chichiri bantered, and Tasuki frowned, sending his companion a sidelong glance as he completely misread the monk’s innuendo.

“Are you saying… Anzu and… Hotohori-sama?” He asked slowly. “Yeesh, that’s just sick! He’s married! He’s dead! He’s…”

“…Right over there.” Chichiri interrupted calmly, as the tree under which the two travellers sat came into view. At the sight of them, Tasuki faltered, his hand twitching towards his tessen as he registered the fact Anzu’s arm was around Hotohori’s shoulders.

“Anzu, dammit, are you crazy?” He demanded. “What are you doing! Get away from him, you idiot — you have no idea what he might do to you!”

“Genrou!” Anzu’s eyes lit up with surprise. “Chichiri! Oh, it worked!”

“What worked?” Tasuki looked suspicious, his fingers still hovering in the direction of his weapon. “What are you talking about?”

“Hotohori-sama.” Chichiri approached them, dropping down on the ground beneath the spreading tree branches as he cast the befuddled swordsman a grin. “You *were* trying to find me, then — that was Anzu’s idea, wasn’t it? That’s what she means.”

“Chi… chiri?” Hotohori frowned, his brow creasing in confusion, and Chichiri nodded his head.

“So you do know who I am. I wondered about that.” He said

pensively. “I’m glad we found you — and that you’re in one piece. More or less.”

“Wait a minute, wait just one minute!” Tasuki held up his hands. “Can someone explain to me what’s going on here? Last night, this guy burnt down my village. Today, everyone’s hugging him and actin’ buddy-buddy like it never even happened?”

Hotohori looked stricken, and Chichiri frowned, sending the bandit an admonishing glance.

“Don’t shout. Just because Anzu is hugging him, there’s no need for that.” He said sternly.

“This has nothing to do with goddamn Anzu! What about my village?!”

“I… I don’t remember.” Hotohori said softly. “Anzu-san told me… and I am truly sorry if I caused harm. I do not… I do not recall.”

“It’s not his fault, Genrou.” Anzu got to her feet, coming to the bandit’s side as she raised a pleading gaze to his. “You know that, deep down, don’t you? You wouldn’t believe at first that Hotohori-sama was able to do something like that — you didn’t believe it was him. You know he wouldn’t hurt your village… and really, he’s been nothing but kind to me. He saved me from some slave traders, when I thought I was in a real jam. So please don’t be angry with him. I know he didn’t mean what happened last night.”

“That doesn’t rebuild the village.” Tasuki said quietly, and Hotohori dropped his gaze.

“If I were still Saihitei, and still able to make such decisions, I would do whatever I could to restore the damage I have caused.” He said soberly. “But if there is anything I can do, even in this form, that will help — please, you have only to ask me. I… I do not wish to be the cause of people’s pain.”

Tasuki stared at him for a moment. Then he swore, shaking his head.

“You *sound* like Hotohori-sama.” He admitted. “And you… you *look* like him, now, without that crazed look in your eyes. So what, were you trippin’ on some wild drug or somethin’ last night? Chichiri said he thought you were havin’ some kind of delusion — is that true?”

“He was dreaming.” Anzu said quietly. “About a battle against Kutou. He mentioned a man wearing armour — with a dragon on his helmet. The Emperor… Saihitei-sama was killed in conflict against

Kutou, wasn't he? I think… I think he was remembering that."

"But if I am dead… how can I be here, in this form, with all of you?" Hotohori looked non-plussed. "With my memories so shunted out of place, and my heart so full of confusion? I don't understand… why has this occured? Am I truly Hotohori — or is this just another strange dream created in the mind of a deluded man?"

"This is real, you know." Chichiri reached out a hand to haul the other man to his feet. "And you're definitely real, too. You're not a spirit any more, but I can't say you've been reborn, either. I'm starting to think that that's part of the point — that this world still needs Suzaku's warriors in some way. So this existance — this body — is probably not permanent. I also wouldn't say it's necessarily living. That's why you're so disjointed, I think. You're out of sync, because you shouldn't really be here."

"Then I *was* Emperor of Kounan." Hotohori said heavily. "And I *did* die in battle against Kutou, as Anzu-san has just said. These memories are real?"

"Yes, they are." Chichiri nodded gravely, and Hotohori raised sad eyes to the monk's gentle gaze.

"In which case, Houki is not an illusion either, is she?" He murmured. "And the baby she protects… these are truly my wife and child? I really have abandoned my family for the sake of defending Kounan?"

"Not abandoned." Chichiri shook his head. "You made a sacrifice to protect them, and they know that. Houki-sama still believes you're protecting her, Hotohori-sama. She said as much, when we spoke to her — she said that it makes her feel safe. And your son is growing up secure and well within the palace walls — he will be a fine Emperor when he is old enough to take the responsibility. But right now, Kounan needs you again. You, and us, and the others. Even if you don't remember everything, if you remember me, you must remember something about being one of Suzaku's chosen."

"I… I do." Hotohori acknowledged. He gestured at Tasuki, who was still looking a little bemused by the whole situation.

"When Anzu-san described you to me, I remembered you, also. Fighting for your country, a sword in your hand." He added. "And when she called Chichiri by name, I recalled it clearly, that we had been acquaintances. That I bear the mark of Suzaku and I must also bear its burdens."

He frowned, then nodded his head.

“I will do what I can to help, if it can make amends even a little for the atrocity I have apparently committed on your home.” He added, and at the contrition in his voice, Tasuki sighed, slowly shaking his head as he clapped a hand down on the Emperor’s shoulder.

“Forget it.” He said frankly. “That weren’t you. This is. Even if you are dead and propped up by some weird magic. This is the Hotohori-sama I remember.”

“Then we should find Aidou, and leave Eiyou.” Chichiri suggested. “If she’s managed to find food, we can eat outside the city, and then work out our next move.”

“We’re not going back to Reikaku-zan?” Anzu looked startled.

“Hey, what’s this ‘we’?” Tasuki rounded on her. “What are you even *doin’* here? I told you to stop behind with Kouji — don’t you *listen*?”

“I wanted to help you. And I did. I found Hotohori.” Anzu said firmly, tossing her head at the tone in his voice. “Don’t yell at me. I did you a favour, didn’t I? And I’m not going back there without you. I told you that’s why I came back to Kounan — because I wanted to be alongside you. And I’m going to be — whether you like it or not.”

“Anzu, this is not a picnic!” Tasuki exclaimed. “It’s dangerous, dammit! It’s not a trip for girls!”

“Then why is Aidou allowed to come, huh?” Anzu put her hands on her hips, looking petulant. “Because you’re too scared of your big sister to say no? If she can come, *I* can come. And if you try and send me back to Reikaku-zan alone, I won’t go. I’ll just follow you out again.”

“You *were* stalking me!”

“No, I was looking for you. It’s a different thing!”

Chichiri sighed, sending the bewildered Hotohori a long-suffering smile.

“Young love.” He said flippantly. “What can you do?”

A buzz of flame flared across towards them at this, and Chichiri nimbly jumped back from it’s blast, pulling the former Emperor with him as he turned to send Tasuki an admonishing glare.

“You really shouldn’t wave that thing around so near a built up area.. I told you — we’ve had enough fire.” He said firmly, as sparks

flickered from the tessen's razor sharp edges. "Put it away, you know? We'll find Aidou, and then we'll find somewhere to camp. If Anzu wants to come, then I have no objections. As she said, Aidou-san is already with us — and besides, she's probably safer with us than trying to go back to the mountain alone at night. You know that."

"Fine." Tasuki glowered, but he reluctantly re-sheathed his tessen, folding his arms. "But you're taking responsibility. This wasn't my decision."

"All right." Chichiri nodded. "If you want."

"So *why* aren't we going back to the mountain?" Anzu asked curiously, as they made their way back towards the centre of the city in search of Tasuki's determined elder sister.

"Because we've only found His Highness so far." Chichiri answered simply. "Whatever's happening in this world, Anzu — the re-emergence of Seishi who are meant to be dead, the negativity in the atmosphere, the disappearing stars… all of these things are connected, I'm sure. And it's connected to us, I'm sure of that, too. Tamahome isn't here, but if Hotohori-sama is, the others must be. I've felt Nuriko's chi on and off for the last few days, although I'm starting to think he's on the move, which is why it's been so difficult for me to pin-point. We need to find the other Seishi — for two reasons. One, in case they pose a danger to people, stuck in confused states like his Highness. And two, because I think resolving this problem is going to take as much Suzaku-driven strength as we can muster. Even without Tamahome, we must be able to do something — but only if we act as a team."

Tasuki frowned, glancing between his companions. Then he shrugged.

"Which means we've got some serious searchin' to do." He said quietly. "What are we waitin' for? Let's go."

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

The fire was dying out now.

From his darkened corner, the man cast it a half-hearted glance, knowing that he needed firewood but lacking the energy or drive to go and fetch any from the surrounding forestland. Outside the small, ramshackle property, clouds hung low in the sky and the miasma of despair and disease hung heavily across the surrounding region.

And yet, even though his keen senses could feel this change in the atmosphere, still he kept his futile vigil, watching absently as the last glows of the flame flickered into reddish embers and then to blackened ash. A cool wind blew around the cramped room, sending sprays of this black dust flying onto surfaces and floor alike, but still the man sat there, unmoved.

In his heart beat only one memory. One thing which, for no apparent reason, had infiltrated his entire soul and which he was unable to forget, although remembering brought him nothing but pain and sadness. The face of a beautiful woman, young and smiling, echoed through his thoughts with every breath, and he rubbed his temples, seeking to push her away yet fearing the emptiness that her absence in his heart might bring.

At length he stumbled to his feet, moving to the door of the dusty old cottage as he cast his gaze south towards the town of Choukou. Even from there, with his substantial height and bearing he was able to see the density of the cloud hovering near the city, but although he felt detached from its clutches, somehow he knew that he and it were connected. That somehow, it had come here because of him — such knowledge brought tears to his eyes, although even then he felt detached from them, like they were being shed by another soul from another lifetime completely.

The woman's face danced once more in front of his and he sighed, shaking his head slowly.

"Shouka." He whispered, the name coming readily to his lips, and the woman in his mind smiled, as if acknowledging her identity. For a moment he let her play there, laughing and teasing and holding out a hand to him, but then, as the images grew darker, he let out a cry of

anguish, as the vibrant young figure became frail and wracked by pain, screaming the name of someone who never came.

Somehow, even in his dazed state, the man knew that someone was him.

The squeal of a rodent at his feet startled him out of his nightmare state and he glanced down, seeing the small rat sniffing and nuzzling against the wall of the property, clearly looking for food. It was a mangy, flea-bitten creature, thin and covered with the scratch and teeth marks of a battle with another over the scarce supplies of food that occasionally littered the floor. Almost instinctively, the man bent down, holding out his left hand to the creature, who sniffed at it cautiously, then inched forward, nosing between his fingers as if searching for something edible on his skin. For a moment, the man sat there, just watching the rat in its ongoing battle for survival. Then, as the sadness of his situation welled up within him once more, he felt a strange, prickling sensation tiptoe across his palm, growing stronger and more decided as the memories of Shouka filled his thoughts again. He closed his eyes, seeking to shut them out as his palm burned and ached in a strange way, almost as if he had thrust it into the fire that he had so carelessly allowed to die moments earlier.

For a second, he did not move. Then, as he felt something soft and limp against his fingers, he opened his eyes, glancing down at the creature that a second before had been eagerly sniffing and licking at his fingers for food. The rat lay still, glassy-eyed and motionless across his palm, and disbelief touched his otherwise flat expression.

Slowly, almost gingerly, as if afraid of what he saw, he took the rat up in his other hand, examining it carefully as if looking for a reason for its sudden, unexpected death. Perhaps an infected wound — or maybe, in the end, starvation — but despite the creature's thin, moth-eaten appearance, he could see no reason why the animal should have perished.

He loosed his grip on it as fear rushed through him, pounding in his ears as he left the confines of the hut, suddenly suffocating in its secure, remote confinement. As his gaze was once more drawn towards Choukou, he felt the burning sensation in his left palm once more and, glancing down at it, he noticed with both surprise and alarm that across his skin had appeared vivid red lines, cutting through his palm as if carved by a knife. A character was written there, and as he stretched his fingers, he saw it brighten, and then fade to nothing at all.

Unnerved, the man left the hut altogether, heading down the

hillside towards the distant town of Choukou below. Although the symbol was gone, his hand still prickled and tingled, and somehow he knew that it had been this which had taken the rat's life.

Another image of the woman — of Shouka — permeated his confused brain, and as he reached the city limits, he sank to his knees, aware of the cries and calls of the townsfolk in their plague-haunted crisis. The darkness that had invaded his heart hung heavy around him, and the people that had become his neighbours, and in the distance, the sound of her voice was so real that he almost thought she was calling to him on the wind.

"I let you die." He murmured. "Shouka… I… let… you… die."

"You know, we could easily have found an inn or somewhere within the city to spend the night."

Aidou glanced up at the sky overhead, then frowned, turning to send Chichiri a questioning look. "Is it really necessary for us to have left the town so soon? Since it was getting late, I thought…"

"I don't have much money with me." Chichiri admitted. "And I think it's unlikely Tasuki has any. There are five of us, and it would be expensive, even to share one room — which you and Anzu might not appreciate, in the long run."

He smiled.

"Plus, it's a nice night, and it's easier for me to use my sensory abilities when I'm not being crowded by a thousand busy traders hurrying home for the night." He added. "And if we'd stayed in town, we'd have lost Tasuki for the evening, you know? Too many sources of alcohol — I've been there and I don't need a repeat performance."

"Bandits drink. It's one of the things we do." Tasuki objected, stretching out on his back as he slipped his fingers beneath his head. "Besides, Aidou, shut up whining, will ya? All you've done is complain since we left Reikaku-zan. It's not like you've got a farmstead to go mooch around in right now anyway, so quit it already!"

From her position beneath the spreading branches of a nearby tree, Anzu inwardly winced at the brusqueness of his assessment, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Hotohori flinch slightly at the mention of the village fire. She pursed her lips, getting to her feet as she crossed the grass towards him.

"Hotohori-sama, in the city, you promised to help me use a sword." She said hesitantly. "I know you're probably tired, and it's been a long

day. But… I'd appreciate it, if you don't mind. I want to be able to defend myself properly — I don't want to have to rely on other people to protect me all the time."

"Anzu." Hotohori glanced up at her, surprise in his expression, and Anzu was relieved to see the shadowed look leave his golden eyes. He nodded his head, getting to his feet as his hand drifted absently to the hilt of his sword. "Yes, of course. I remember… I did promise you, and I do not like to break a promise."

"I guess now I know why you hold it so naturally." Anzu sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "If you were Saihitei-sama, then you must have been trained by the best in the land."

"Probably." Hotohori admitted. "They were just teachers, as far as I'm concerned. I don't remember faces or names — but I do remember working hard to perfect the art. I think I believed, in my naïve youth, that if I could hold the sword well and use it to defend my own person, I could use it to defend Kounan, too."

He smiled ruefully, pulling his blade from its scabbard and laying it down on the grass.

"This is not like any other sword, however." He added. "It has… some kind of sense about it. Some kind of… power, I think. I do not know how to explain it, but it is like… like I flow into it, when I use it. Like it is a natural part of myself, rather than a weapon."

"That's because it was given to you by Taiitsukun, you know?" Chichiri overheard this, casting him a grin. "It's a holy sword — a *shinken* — not just a random warrior's blade. That's why you feel connected to it."

"I do not know who Taiitsukun is, though I feel I should." Hotohori sighed. "But my fear is that you will not be able to use it, Anzu-san. If it is so tuned to me…"

"Chichiri?" Anzu turned, sending the sorcerer a questioning look, and he smiled, holding his hand out towards the blade, then shrugging.

"Last night it seemed like a cursed blade. Today it seems like normal." He said evenly. "I don't think it's a problem, you know? You're not going to wield the power of Suzaku, but then, when Suzaku was sealed, Hotohori-sama could still hold it and use it to wound Nakago in battle. Besides, Miaka also used it against Soi, once. I don't think it will hurt her to touch it, Heika. It's a blessed sword, but Anzu's not a demon. Her intentions are true and honest — Suzaku

wouldn't mind."

Anzu bent down, hesitating, then picking up the gold and red hilt in her fingers. Slowly she lifted it, glancing at the gleaming silver of the blade.

"It *is* beautiful." She murmured. "A holy sword? I can believe it."

"Chichiri-san, I think there's a stream nearby." Aidou came to stand beside him, casting the sword and Anzu a doubtful look, then turning her attention fully to the monk. "You said you fished, didn't you? I'm pretty sure I saw life in it — it would be a quick and easy solution to an evening meal, if you could catch something."

"Catch something?" Chichiri looked momentarily taken aback, and Tasuki smirked, amusement crossing his face.

"Whenever he catches a fish, he tosses it back, Oneechan." He said lazily, not taking his gaze off the starry sky above them. "I don't think I've ever seen him land one and gut it, yet."

"Well, that's going to be a lot of help if we starve." Aidou said pragmatically. Chichiri rubbed his chin ruefully.

"Tasuki has a point, you know." He admitted. "I don't usually like killing things unecessarily."

"I'd call filling my stomach a necessity — just go do it, huh?" Tasuki's eyes flitted in the monk's direction, and Chichiri sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"All right. Fine." He agreed. "I'll try and catch some fish."

"I'll gut them and cook them, you needn't worry about that." Aidou said frankly. "I just thought maybe you could use those sensing powers of yours to detect them more easily."

"I don't think I've ever tried to sense a fish's chi before." Chichiri looked bewildered, and Tasuki snorted appreciatively.

"First time for everything, buddy." he said with a casual flick of his hand. "It's safer not to argue with her, anyway. What she got from the market wasn't much, really, when you consider there are five of us."

"I don't believe I need to eat." Hotohori raised his head at this. "If my body is not like yours, then surely I'm not going to sustain it with food, so you need not waste it on me."

"We don't know what your body is running on." Chichiri admitted doubtfully, and Hotohori shrugged.

“I do not feel hungry.” He said simply. “So confine your catch to providing for the four of you. That will be less of a strain, anyway — and I am quite content.”

“All right.” Aidou nodded her head. “Then you catch some fish, Chichiri-san, and I’ll see what I can gather in the way of wild fruit. The market was already starting to close by the time I got to buying food —” At this juncture she sent her brother a pointed glare, “But I’m a farmer’s daughter and I know what’s edible when I see it. I’m sure we’ll manage all right, so long as it doesn’t rain. Chichiri-san, I’ll show you where I saw the fish — it’s just this way.”

With which remark she grabbed the startled monk by the arm, leading him away towards the distant sound of running water that permeated the atmosphere.

Tasuki chuckled.

“Now he knows how I feel.” He said with a grin. “He’d better keep an eye on her fist, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Really, Tasuki, you and your sister are startlingly alike.” Hotohori observed mildly, and Tasuki sat up with a jerk, casting the former Emperor an indignant look.

“What the hell’s that meant to mean?” He demanded. “And hey… are you teaching Anzu to use that thing or are you trying to find a good way to grope her? Because unless you’d forgotten, you’re both married *and* dead!”

Hotohori started from where he had been guiding Anzu’s grip on the sword, and Anzu pulled a face, eying the bandit impatiently.

“He’s showing me how to hold it.” She snapped. “What’s wrong with you? I thought you’d be glad that I was learning to fight for myself.”

“Fine, learn to fight, but yeesh, there’s something perverted about a girl hanging all over a dead guy like that.” Tasuki folded his arms, a look of disapproval in his eyes.

“Are you jealous?” Anzu raised an eyebrow, and Tasuki bristled indignantly.

“Jealous of what?” He demanded. “I just think it’s kinda gross, that’s all. First you’re hugging all over him, now this — doesn’t it weird you out even a little bit that he’s been dead and buried two years or more?”

“Thank you for reminding me of that fact, Tasuki.” Hotohori said

evenly. “I’m sure I had forgotten.”

“With your memory the way it’s been lately, anything’s possible.” Tasuki muttered.

“Genrou, stop it. He’s your friend, and he’s been kind to me.” Anzu objected. “Stop being grumpy just because you’re hungry or jealous or… whatever’s eating you, I don’t know. Don’t take it out on him.”

“I’m not being grumpy and I’m not jealous!” Tasuki protested. “I’m just saying it like it is! You’re alive and he’s dead — it’s sick! Don’t you get it yet? He’s pretty much a walking corpse!”

“But still beautiful.” Hotohori reflected absently. Tasuki groaned, rubbing his temples.

“You really are coming back to yourself.” He admitted with a grimace.

“Well, I’m not bothered by the fact he’s dead.” Anzu said firmly. “I mean, he’s not really, is he? Saihitei-sama may have died, but *Hotohori* is still here. Because otherwise, he wouldn’t be here like this. Even if it is some kind of messed up magic — he’s still real. And he still saved my life earlier today.”

“I’m glad I did.” Hotohori offered her a smile. “Although in the end I feel you’ve helped me more than I have you. I’ve felt more… settled, since I met you.”

“Hotohori-sama, *what* did I just say?” Tasuki exclaimed, and the former Emperor laughed.

“You really do sound jealous, you know,” He reflected absently. “For someone who says he hates women.”

“That doesn’t mean I believe in dead people and live ones getting it on! Especially if they’re already married — what about Houki and that brat of yours, huh?”

Hotohori frowned, then shook his head.

“I have left Houki’s life for good.” He said quietly. “And I have no designs on Anzu. I simply respect her kindness to me and wish to repay it, that’s all. I am, as you correctly said, dead. My existance here is temporary. And if I can use that time to help her learn to better protect herself, so be it. It’s not a foolish plan, really… a young woman is always at risk in a busy city like Eiyou if she doesn’t know how to do that.”

He turned his attention back to his pupil with a slight smile.

“Anzu, you’ve almost got the grip right — but you have to be more decisive in your hold. It won’t bite you.”

He stood back, eying her keenly.

“You said you were a circus performer, didn’t you?” He asked softly. Anzu looked startled, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She agreed. “For a long time. Why?”

“When you first performed a tumble or something of that nature, I’m sure you were tentative and afraid of it.” Hotohori said slowly. “But with time and experience, you grew to trust in your own body and skill. I won’t have the time to devote to you that kind of training — much as I wish to help you, I don’t know how much time this body has, or what it will have to face. So you must try yourself to push past that first, frightened step. You must believe you can wield this thing, or else you never will manage to do it. Belief is a big part of doing anything — if you do not have faith you can hold the sword, then you will never be able to do so.”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Tasuki grimaced in their direction. “Girls don’t make good swordsmen, you know. They’re not built that way. They swing their arms and boom — there’s something there gettin’ in the way. Besides, they have their own, inbuilt weapons system. You’ll see, spending time with Aidou. They don’t need swords… they’re damn lethal in their own right.”

“I can’t be a swordsman, Genrou, because I’m not a man. I’m going to be a swords*woman*.” Anzu said defiantly. “And I’m going to be a good one, too. You’ll see.”

“I’ll believe it when I do.” Tasuki snorted derisively. He flopped back onto the grass, staring up at the sky once more with a dissatisfied sigh.

“Tama’s stars are still missing.” He said frankly. “You know, I could throttle that jerk, running off to his little love nest with Miaka and leaving us with all this to deal with. Whatever ‘this’ even is. It’s nuts… how do stars disappear, anyway? Can they do that — just vanish overnight?”

“I don’t think so, you know.” Chichiri answered him, as he returned from the stream, Aidou in tow. Tasuki’s sister had three or four fish strung over her arm, and as she settled herself on the grass, unsheathing the practical knife she carried at her waist, the monk frowned, shaking his head slightly then moving away to sit beside Tasuki on the ground. “But all the rest of us are still up there… that’s

a good sign, at the very least."

"So all those stars… are your stars?" Anzu's eyes darted towards the sky at this. "Which is yours, Genrou? Which is Tasuki?"

"That one." Tasuki lifted his right hand lazily, his symbol blazing on his forearm as he flicked his fingers in the direction of the most star-studded constellation. "That's Tasuki… right there."

"And Chichiri? Hotohori-sama? Which are you?"

"They're just stars, Anzu." Aidou frowned. "Chichiri-san and Shun'u and the other Suzaku warriors may have their names, but they're not constellations themselves. I mean, they're human… like you and me."

"I know that." Anzu admitted. "But still, it must be kind of nice to be connected to the sky like that. The stars are so beautiful."

"That one is Chichiri, you know." Chichiri indicated, giving her a grin as he did so. "And the serpent is Hotohori."

"So the others are Chiriko, Mitsukake and Nuriko, yes?" Anzu frowned. "And Tamahome is gone?"

"Tamahome's should be there." Chichiri agreed, flexing his finger towards a gap in the sky. "I'm not quite sure when it disappeared, but I imagine it was when Sukunami Taka went to Miaka's world to begin his life there."

"To think that Miaka and Tamahome's love should still be blighted even now." Hotohori said sadly, and Chichiri shot him a sidelong glance.

"You remember Miaka, then? And Tamahome, too?" He asked gently. Hotohori nodded.

"I do, now." He agreed soberly. "That is the reason I died, Chichiri. Not just to save Kounan, by attacking that monster. But because he sought to go to Miaka's world and put them in danger. I remember it very clearly, now. Miaka and Tamahome… after everything they have endured, is it really wrong for them to have a future together?"

"The world can be a cruel place, regardless of which world you're talking about." Chichiri said sadly. "It's just how it is, you know?"

"I know." The former Emperor said darkly, and Anzu saw a shadow touch his eyes once more. "Whenever I think of Houki, I remember it only too well."

"You know what I don't totally understand?" Tasuki put in at that moment.

“What’s that?” Hotohori looked startled, and Tasuki sat up, gesturing in the former Emperor’s direction.

“You being here like this, and stuff.” He admitted. “I mean, before, you were there, but as spirits. What happened? How did you get to have a body but lose your memories? What kind of screwed up power did that?”

“I’d like to know that too.” Hotohori admitted. “But I don’t know the answer.”

“Actually, I think this is a bigger deal than just resurrecting Seishi.” Chichiri reflected. “I’ve said it before, but I think it does have something to do with the makeup of our world.”

“Like what, exactly, though? Trees and animals and villages and stuff?” Tasuki frowned.

“Not quite, but sort of.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “Remember when we tried to get to Taikyoku-zan? And we couldn’t?”

“Yes. I remember. I fell in a ditch and you didn’t.” Tasuki grimaced. Chichiri laughed.

“Right.” He agreed amiably. “And that weird light that came out — that I said was like the world was bleeding. That too?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m thinking that the world really has got hurt somehow. Properly. In some way.”

“So what? We get a giant bandage and wrap it round Taikyoku-zan?” Tasuki frowned. “How do you heal an entire world, Chichiri? It’s too big. Even Mitsukake’s fist couldn’t do it.”

“I didn’t mean it literally. At least, not like that.” Chichiri sighed. “Look… let me see if I can make it clearer. You remember when we were riding from Souun, and I noticed the change in the stars?”

“Tamahome was missing.” Tasuki nodded. “What about it?”

“Well, Tamahome is missing.” Chichiri reminded him. “Just like we already said. He’s left this world. He became Sukunami Taka, and that’s where the trouble lies — I’m pretty sure. Sou Kishuku was a man of this world. He had a family here, and a past, and all of those things. But Sukunami Taka’s history and roots exist in Miaka’s world. He may be Tamahome, but there’s still a conflict. Now he’s gone, there’s no part of Tamahome remaining in our world. All his past, memories, everything about him have gone.”

“And so therefore it’s as if Tamahome never existed at all?” Hotohori asked softly. Chichiri shrugged.

“No, not that exactly.” He said carefully. “More that he did exist, but then was ripped out by Suzaku trying to grant Miaka’s third wish.”

“So it really ain’t just to do with the stars goin’ funny, and our friends coming back from the dead half nuts?” Tasuki demanded. Chichiri spread his hands.

“I thought it was big before, but now we’ve found Hotohori-sama, I’m starting to think it’s huge, you know?” He said helplessly. “That the entire structure of this world is slowly falling apart.”

“So what you’re saying is that because he’s taken off with the Miko back to their weird, claustrophobic world, this world is gonna fall to pieces?” Tasuki snorted. “I’m glad Tama can’t hear that. His ego would have a field day.”

“It’s not Tamahome himself, exactly. But the fact that he’s not there.” Chichiri reached across to tap Tasuki’s left hand.

“For example, if someone took a sword and cut that off… you’d be pretty annoyed about it, wouldn’t you?”

“Hey!” Tasuki pulled his hand away hurriedly. “I thought you were against all the violent stuff — noone’s cutting off my hand, thank you!”

“My point being that you’d be incomplete without it.” Chichiri said patiently. “And the world’s missing Tamahome. Maybe that’s why it’s ‘bleeding’ too.”

“Because someone cut off its arm?” Tasuki blinked. “The world has arms?”

“Tasuki!” Chichiri groaned. “Do you have to be so literal all the time!? No, of course not. Because there are only six Seishi left in Kounan, that’s why! One of us is missing and it’s upset the balance!”

“Even though Nuriko and I and Mitsukake and Chiriko are dead, we still exist here. And when we are reborn, we will continue to exist.” Hotohori said thoughtfully. “Are you saying, then, that we will remain Suzaku’s Seishi, even beyond rebirth? That it is as Anzu says — Saihitei-sama has died, but Hotohori still exists?”

“That’s the theory I’m working on.” Chichiri admitted. “But what the implications are — I’m still a little fuzzy on those. And on how to fix it, too. All I can think of is that we need to find the others. I’m hoping then what we need to do will become clear.”

“Mmm.” Tasuki frowned, then. “I suppose I see what you both mean. Kind of. Tama’s skipped out and left a great big hole somewhere — not just in the stars over Kounan, but in everything. In the whole world itself. Right?”

“I think so.” Chichiri nodded. “Remember, this was the one wish Byakko refused to grant Suzuno-sama and Tatara. The Beast Gods grant any wishes — any at all. But not *that* wish. I’m wondering if that’s why. It’s not just a case of time moving differently in this world, and Tamahome’s reflection and shadow in Miaka’s. Some element of all of the Seishi needs to be in this world. I haven’t quite pieced together how that’s possible, or why it even matters so much. But it’s the only thing that makes any sense to me. Suzaku — and Taiitsukun — broke the rules somehow, and this is the result. Even though they tried to get around it, creating Sukunami Taka and splitting Tamahome from his memories — the end result was the same.”

“So how do we fill it in? Go to Miaka’s world and yank Tama back here?”

“We *can’t* go to Miaka’s world.” Chichiri shook his head. “It’s not like the last time… there’s nothing here of Miaka’s for us to use as a medium. And besides, if we brought him back here, that undoes everything those two have overcome to be together. It seems a bit harsh, you know?”

“I know.” Tasuki admitted. “But if this world is gonna fall apart without Tama being here — what else can we do about it?”

“As yet, I’m not sure. But finding those of us who *are* in this world has to be a priority — which means we have to track down Nuriko, Chiriko and Mitsukake.” Chichiri said with a sigh. “I’m pretty certain now that the reason they’re here is some kind of safety measure. The world is collapsing in on itself, and so this was a last gasp attempt to restore balance. If they’d been reborn properly, they’d have been nothing more than babies at best — if that, even. We’d have been truly stuck.”

“So is this just happening in Kounan?” Anzu looked frightened. “Or in the other places too?”

“Since the hole is in Kounan’s sky, I’m guessing that it’s ultimately us who have to handle it.” Chichiri sighed. “But to be honest — I don’t know. I’ve no idea whether the Seishi for the other lands have been reborn. I doubt it. Like I said, this is Kounan’s problem. Suzaku’s fault. There’s nothing the other quarters of the sky can do about it… they have no connection to Tamahome. It’s down to us.”

“And that’s why Hotohori-sama and the others got spewed out of Taikyoku-zan, before it went nuts and started a Seishi free policy?” Tasuki asked. Chichiri nodded.

“Like I said, I think it was an emergency measure by a wounded world to try and mend the damage.” He agreed. “Even if it meant they came back disjointed and missing their memories somewhat — at least, if they were here, we’d be able to find them and hopefully, get their help. I think it’s all been deliberate, you know? Hotohori doesn’t remember everything, because the process of rebirth was interrupted. He was flung back, instead, and he’d already lost a part of himself somehow. But the world — whatever force is powering this — it must have banked on the fact that those of us left could reach him when we found him.”

“And you have.” Hotohori admitted. “You were the one who broke through my delusion, Chichiri — since then, I have begun to remember more and more of my true self.”

“That makes sense.” Tasuki looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. “I get it. I think.”

“Right.” Chichiri nodded. “So we have to find the others… and restore them the way we have Hotohori-sama. Then we’ll think it over and see what our options are. Perhaps one of them *will* be able to tell us more than we already know — will remember more about leaving Taikyoku-zan — but I imagine that whatever we have to do, it requires the powers of all of us.”

“But you haven’t even sensed Chiriko’s chi, have you? Or Mitsukake?”

“No, not once.” Chichiri admitted. “But if Hotohori and Nuriko are around, they must be too. Surely it’s a matter of time before I pick them up too?”

“If you think so, I won’t argue.” Tasuki shrugged. “So we find the others and then try and build a Tamahome-shaped block to plug up Taikyoku-zan’s red light leak or something. Right?”

“I think it’ll be a bit more complicated than that, you know…”

“Figures.” Tasuki sent his companion a rueful glance. “Chichiri, I don’t mind being a Suzaku Seishi. Actually, most of the time, I get a kick out of it. But it would be really nice if for once we began a mission I totally understood!”

Chichiri laughed.

“Don’t worry too much about it. I think it’ll get clearer as we go on.” He said reassuringly. “For now we should…”

He stopped in mid-sentence, his body tensing suddenly as he raised his head towards the sky.

“We should what?” Tasuki frowned. “Earth to Chichiri — what’s with you now?”

“Shut up.” Chichiri held up his hands, and Tasuki bristled, ready to retort. However, his sister was too quick for him, dropping down beside him and clamping her hand over his mouth.

“He said shut up, so shut up, idiot.” She hissed. “Come make yourself useful, instead. I’m done cooking the fish — if you want to eat, you can help.”

“Chichiri, are you… all right?” Anzu asked hesitantly, as the monk’s silence seemed to stretch on into more than a couple of minutes. He frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it, then raising his gaze to the young girl’s.

“Sorry.” He said, offering her a smile. “I was just… trying to ascertain whether I’d felt something significant… or whether it was just because we’d been talking about it under the stars like this.”

“Felt something like what?” Tasuki wrestled himself free of Aidou’s grip, eying the sorcerer expectantly. “Nuriko again? Did you get a fix on him at last?”

“No. Not Nuriko.” Chichiri shook his head. “Mitsukake.”

“Mitsukake?” Tasuki blinked. “What in hell happened to tracking Nuriko? You need to reset your signals, buddy — you’re aimin’ far and wide!”

“But Mitsukake is as good a person to go after as Nuriko, if Chichiri can locate his position.” Hotohori pointed out. “Surely, at this stage, one Seishi is as good as another?”

“He’s in Choukou. Or thereabouts.” Chichiri frowned. “I’m pretty sure… no, I’m very sure. That’s where he is.”

“That makes sense. His woman died near there, didn’t she?” Tasuki frowned. “But you weren’t with us when we found Mitsukake — how would you know where Choukou was?”

“I grew up not far from there myself.” Chichiri flashed him a vague smile. “Choukou was less than an hour’s ride from my home village… Mitsukake and I come from a very similar area of Kounan, you know.

So I know the area.”

“Then tomorrow we go to this Choukou place?” Anzu asked. Chichiri hesitated, and Tasuki frowned.

“Well?” He demanded. “Are we going or not? In case you’d forgotten, my Dad still has a broken leg back at Reikaku-zan, and I’d like to be able to fix it so he and my Ma can get the hell out of there and Aidou can stop stalking me everywhere I go!”

“Shun’u…!”

Aidou raised her fist threateningly, and Tasuki grimaced at her.

“All right, all right, I’m helping with the fish. Geez.” He said darkly. “Get a grip, woman, would ya?”

“Chichiri?” Hotohori pressed. “Are we going to Choukou? Surely finding Mitsukake is a positive move?”

Chichiri frowned. Then he nodded his head.

“I think we have to.” He agreed. “The feeling… wasn’t a good one. But then, when I first sensed your life force, it wasn’t a good feeling either. We managed to break through yours… so if Mitsukake is similarly confused, we should be able to do something for him too. I… I hope.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Either way, we need to go.” He admitted. “So yes. Tomorrow… tomorrow we go to Choukou.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

“We’ve been travelling for more than a day and we’re still only this far south.”

Tamatama gazed discontentedly out of the window of the inn, eying the sparsely populated streets below with a mixture of resignation and disappointment. “I’m sorry, Kourin. I thought we’d make better progress than this.”

“We’re doing all right.” Nuriko shrugged his shoulders, settling down on the bed as he adjusted the hem of his skirt. “And I thought we had an understanding, Tamatama — I’m not Kourin any more. Remember?”

“Oh. Yes.” Tamatama turned, looking sheepish as he nodded his head. “I’m sorry. Force of habit. You look at me with that face and I can only see Kourin-chan looking back at me. It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks — I’m trying to remember, I promise.”

“All right.” Mischief sparkled in Nuriko’s eyes, and he nodded his head. “It’s been a long day, anyhow, so I’ll let you off this time. We’ve come quite far, really, considering. The last time I did this trip, I had to hitch most of the way and I’m pretty sure I didn’t get a chance to spend a night somewhere like this — so don’t worry too much about it. Saving the world can be put on hold a while longer — a girl needs her beauty sleep.”

Tamatama laughed, leaning up against the wall as he regarded his friend in some amusement.

“You really have remembered everything now, haven’t you?” He reflected. Nuriko nodded.

“I think so. I mean, I don’t think there are gaps in my recollections, although if there are, stands to reason I won’t remember they’re there.” He bantered impishly. “Yes, I’m all right now. Call it what you will, but I guess seeing Kourin was what I needed to spark me back to my senses.”

“You really think she was there?” Tamatama asked softly. “This is a strange area, you know. We’re not ten miles from Choukou, I heard the carriage driver say so when we arrived. That’s why I thought we

should sleep here, and not go further. That town has a strange reputation — all wrapped up in living dead walking through the graveyards at night and other like rumours. It could just be the influence of that, you know."

"Choukou." Nuriko looked pensive. "Now that's a place I haven't been in some time."

"You've been there?"

"Yes. I didn't realise it was so close." Nuriko nodded. "One of my Seishi brethren practiced medicine in the local area — or well, no, that's not strictly true. He'd given it up when we found him. But he was trained as a doctor and his powers were healing ones. The undead in Choukou weren't a myth, Tamatama, but a demon's work… but those have been laid to rest, now. Mitsukake saved the town using his Suzaku gifts, and everything settled down to normality."

"Not according to what the people were saying as we came through to our room." Tamatama frowned.

"I didn't hear anything?" Nuriko looked surprised. Tamatama snorted.

"That's because *you* were being flirted with by the man behind the bar." He said derisively. "Who thought he'd ply you with alcohol and then have his way with you, no doubt."

"Men are such idiots." Nuriko said with a chuckle. "But I suppose it *was* distracting. Listening to local gossip would've probably been more useful — you're saying that something's happening in Choukou again?"

"I don't know about again. I don't know enough about the first time to compare." Tamatama shrugged. "But I had no desire to spend the night in a town full of walking deadies."

"Yet you'll share a room here with me? Ironic." Nuriko snorted. Tamatama frowned, shaking his head.

"We've had this conversation. You're not dead, K… Nuriko, and so long as I'm with you, you won't be. I thought you'd given up on the suicidal thoughts, anyway — if you're feeling better, there's no need to dwell on such macabre delusions. You were having bad dreams, that's all… nothing else."

Nuriko was silent for a moment, contemplating. Then he raised sober dark eyes to his friend's irritated ones.

"No… that's not true." He admitted softly. "Tamatama, I am

Nuriko. Nuriko of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. I fell in Hokkan fighting against Ashitare, clearing the way for Suzaku no Miko to reach the Genbu Shinzahou. As a spirit, I followed her, and even used my abilities to help protect her and summon Suzaku a second time. But… that I died… that's beyond question. I know that I did. You can't change it… Nuriko is dead."

"Will you *stop* damn well saying that?" Tamatama hit his meaty fist down on the room's single wooden table, making his companion jump almost out of his skin at the sudden noise. "It's nonsense. You're here, aren't you? Explain that, if you're dead!"

"I can't." Nuriko admitted. "But I know what I remember, that's all. Besides, Kourin confirmed it. When she spoke to me — she told me that I was dead. That she was waiting for me to finish Suzaku's work, and then she'd come for me."

"Right." Tamatama got to his feet, resting his hands firmly on his friend's shoulders as he looked him in the eye. "Enough of this. You don't even know if the Kourin you saw was real or another hallucination. I wanted to let you think of her as real, because it's made you act so much more like yourself. But if all it's going to achieve is make you focus on death and whatever, I'm not going to have it. You're getting morbid and it's annoying me — you should be happy you're here, not worrying about people who are already dead and gone. Please, snap out of it. Whether you're Kourin, Nuriko or Ryuuen, I don't care. But *you are not dead*!"

Nuriko stared at his friend in consternation, registering for the first time tears on the bulky transvestite's lashes. He bit his lip, slowly shaking his head as he reached up to loosen Tamatama's grip.

"When we meet the other Seishi, you'll know that it's that way." He said gravely. "I'm sorry. I guess I didn't realise it would upset you, me talking about it like that. The truth is, I rather got used to being dead — to being a spirit, and protecting Miaka that way. I learnt to cope with it — and the fact that death isn't always the end. I'm resigned to the idea — accepting of it, almost. I suppose I didn't stop and think about how *you'd* feel — because we were friends before I even became Nuriko. And so you're not used… to the sacrifices a Seishi of Suzaku has to make."

Tamatama bit his lip.

"You're serious." He said softly, and Nuriko nodded.

"Listen." He said gently, taking his friend's hand and pulling him down beside him on the bed with a hefty tug. "It's nothing to be sad

about. Really, it isn't. I've told you before — Chou Ryuuen died when Kourin got knocked down. I never really had a chance to know who he was… so it's silly to be sad over the fact he's gone."

"It doesn't matter to me whether you're Ryuuen or Kourin. Or if you're Nuriko." Tamatama repeated. "You're my friend, just as sure as you were when we first met three years ago. Of course it's going to upset me — even if you don't place any value on who you are, I do. Your name isn't important. Your constellation, that's irrelevant to me. You're basically saying that, from the moment Kourin died, you were a dead man walking. That you were just living out time, waiting to die too. And I know that's a lie. Even despite everything you'd been through when we first met, you were such a strong person — so full of life and energy and everything. Even if you were living under someone else's name — don't you realise that those traits a part of you? That's who Chou Ryuuen is, you idiot. I tried to tell you that three years ago and it's just the same now. That's why it's sad for me. You're not just a weapon crafted by Suzaku to live other people's lives and dreams for them — Kourin, Byakuren or this Miko you were born to protect. You exist just as sure as I do. And even if you're all right with this whole sacrificing yourself for Kounan rigmarole, I'm not. You're a person, not just a thing. And I liked that person. She had a hell of a lot to give the world, regardless of the red mark on her chest."

Nuriko's eyes opened wide with surprise, and Tamatama nodded his head.

"I don't want to call you Nuriko." He admitted. "If Nuriko is the reason you're willing to let go of your life."

Nuriko sighed.

"No." He said pensively. "It isn't that. I mean, I am settled with it. I accept it, because there's nothing else to do. I was already meant to be reborn once, but for some reason, I haven't been — and that must be because Nuriko is still needed. There's no other reason I can think of why this could have happened. But… I never lived my life as Ryuuen. And there is no going back. The truth is, my purpose in existing was fulfilled when I fought Ashitare. It was my own fault, in the end. I valued that life maybe more cheaply than I should have… I had no other purpose in my mind than to be Miaka's protector — even if it killed me. I thought I'd let go of Kourin, when I cut my hair, but I'd really just conveyed my regrets onto Suzaku no Miko. I couldn't abandon Miaka even after I died, because I couldn't let go of the big brother complex — that I had to find a little sister I *could* protect. I

failed with Kourin, then Byakuren, and I gave everything for Miaka. I didn't consider myself or my existence in any of this."

He frowned, looking sober as he contemplated this fact.

"I never found out who Ryuuen was, and I paid for it with my life." He concluded. "If I had known — if I had had some other kind of sense of self — I might have fought harder. Held on longer. Survived the fight. But Ryuuen was already dead by then. I trampled him into the ground, if he even existed. Who knows? Maybe Kourin and I weren't so different. Maybe I *was* born this way — a girl at heart, if not in body. But you have to understand that it's not me being macabre or ghoulish, talking like this. Nor does it mean I've given up on life. Quite the opposite. I *want* to be reborn. I *want* to start afresh, and really learn and appreciate who *I* am, this time around. I was a coward in this life, always being someone else instead of facing my problems and being true to myself. So I'll never know whether Ryuuen was homosexual, or a transvestite, or any of those things for sure. But next time… next time I won't make the same mistakes. And that's why I want to do this. Not because I want to die — but because I want to *live*."

Tamatama was silent for a moment, digesting this.

"This will be the last time I get to see you then, won't it?" He asked quietly. "Kourin-chan."

Nuriko started, then slowly nodded his head.

"I'm afraid so." He agreed. "And I'm sorry. I really am. I've caused pain to my family, my friends — I'm sorry for those things. But I can't go back, even if I wanted to be Ryuuen again. I can only go forward. So for my sake, can you try and accept that? You've supported me so far — and it's helped me find my sense of purpose. Will you keep doing that, until we reach Eiyou?"

Tamatama nodded. He moved his heavily sleeved arm up to his face, and Nuriko was sure that he saw his friend dash away a stray tear. The Seishi grinned, pinching his companion playfully on the arm.

"Hey, but it doesn't mean it has to be a wake." He chided lightly. "I'm not gone yet. There's a little time, and I'm glad that I've had the chance to see you and speak to you again, before everything changes for good. Kourin said I had a lot of regrets, and it's true — I do. But this won't be one of them. You were a friend to me when I first went to Yukigase and you've been a friend to me this time around, too. So let's make the most of this little jaunt, okay?"

He winked.

“Then you can find Tenbun and tell him how you helped Suzaku’s warriors save the world.” He added. “Tell him the truth about me, if you like — although by now he’s probably forgotten all about a young maiden named Kourin that he once thought he loved. But by helping me you’re doing your bit for Kounan, too — think of it like that, if it helps.”

“I’m not sure if it does.” Tamatama owned, and Nuriko spread his hands.

“This body has enough life to pretend with, at least for the time being.” He said pragmatically. “So don’t look at me like that. We’ll find Chichiri, find the others and save Kounan. That’s what a Seishi does, and this time you’ll get to see a little bit of why I value it so much — this connection I have to Suzaku and my fellow warriors. We’ll worry about anything else after the fact… okay? After all, if we don’t save Kounan, there’ll be no life for any of us, reborn or otherwise.”

“I suppose so.” Tamatama nodded. He cast his friend a lingering look, and Nuriko saw the flicker of genuine regret in his dark eyes. Then he smiled, and the moment was gone.

“All right, then.” He agreed. “Then sit still, and let me do something about the mess you call your hair. If this *is* your final fling, honey, we’re going to make sure it’s one to remember — no matter how many life-times you cross through!”

“Well, this place is just as creepy as I remember.”

As the group of travellers gazed down onto the cloudy, murky city that was Choukou, Tasuki pursed his lips, shaking his head slowly. “I thought when Mitsukake blitzed Shouka he blitzed the spell over this town too — do you think he missed something?”

“Difficult to say, you know.” Chichiri frowned, sniffing the air as he wrapped his *kesa* once more around his body. “But you’re right — there’s something funny in the atmosphere. I wonder if it’s to do with our little missing Seishi problem — if I didn’t know better, I’d say this was a definite negative energy hotspot.”

“We have to go down there?” Anzu asked hesitantly, and Hotohori frowned, his fingers hovering over his sword hilt as he contemplated the situation.

“Chichiri, you, Tasuki and I should go, if any of us should.” He said

finally. “Aidou-san and Anzu would be better off not venturing in. My last experience with Choukou — if this is the same kind of miasma hanging over it — was that it was a dangerous place for anyone with or without Suzaku’s powers.”

“But Mitsukake *is* here, right?” Tasuki frowned. “Down there, in Choukou, or somewhere nearby. Just as he was before. We go in, find him, and he uses his powers to put it all right. Even if he’s forgotten who he is, Chichiri, you can always cast a spell on him like you did on Hotohori-sama, right? And make him remember. So it should be okay — yes? We just need to find the guy.”

“This whole town has the feel of death about it.” Aidou said absently, and Tasuki shot her a confused look.

“What would *you* know about it?”

“It doesn’t take the power of Suzaku to know when something’s badly wrong.” Aidou’s response was crushing, as she sent him a dark look. “You only have to look at the place. The streets are empty. Noone’s around. It’s cloaked in strange mist even though the day’s perfectly sunny. I’m just using my eyes, Shun’u. If you ask me, this town’s been abandoned.”

“No, it’s not abandoned.” Chichiri shook his head. “There are people here — I can sense their energy, down below. But you’re not wrong, Aidou-san. There is that kind of a nuance here.”

He shivered involuntarily, shaking his head.

“I can’t pretend I like it.” He said at length. “But we have to find Mitsukake. I have a bad feeling… we need to find him, as soon as we can.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Tasuki grabbed the monk by the arm. “Let’s go down there already.”

Chichiri frowned, casting Anzu and then Aidou a glance.

“Hotohori-sama may be right… it might not be wise for us all to go.” He said slowly.

“Well, so we leave the girls here, then?”

“I don’t think we should split up.” Aidou shook her head. “The town might have funny mist around it, but anyone could be lurking in the bushes waiting to rob us or worse. If you’re going down there, Anzu and I are coming with you.”

Chichiri sent her an uneasy look, but he nodded his head.

“All right.” He agreed reticently. “I don’t want to argue in this atmosphere, you know? If that’s how it is, then we’ll all go together.”

For a while they walked in silence, as the outermost flank of Choukou’s small, northern city walls drew nearer and nearer. As they reached the entrance of the town, however, Chichiri let out an exclamation, holding out his hands to pull both Tasuki and Hotohori back.

“No further.” He said urgently, bringing his fingers up in front of his face as he cast a barrier around them. “It’s worse here — the feeling… I don’t think we should go any further. Not while it feels like this.”

“But what about Mitsukake?” Tasuki looked bewildered. “Is he here?”

“Yes, I think so. It’s muzzy, but I think it’s him.”

“So why are we staying outside like a bunch of cowards?” Tasuki demanded. “Chichiri, we came here to get Mitsukake, didn’t we? So why aren’t we going to get him?”

“I don’t think entering the town is a good idea.” Chichiri said carefully. “I’ve cast a barrier around us, and I think it will hold. But there’s something very dark and evil lurking around this town. Something we should beware of. It’s not just an unstable atmosphere causing the haze over this place — although I can imagine it’s helped to feed it. We shouldn’t go into Choukou. We’ll have to find another way to bring Mitsukake out here.”

“How, exactly?” Tasuki frowned. “Chichiri, you’re not making any sense!”

Hotohori gazed out towards the town, a thoughtful look on his face.

“Maybe if *I* went and found Mitsukake?” He hazarded. “I am surely less prone to harm than you are, at least while I am in this form.”

“We don’t know that.” Chichiri shook his head. “You’ve already been a victim of negative energy, Heika. You’re not fully yourself, yet… I don’t think it’s a risk we can take. If you were to lose yourself again…”

He trailed off, and a shadow flickered in Hotohori’s eyes.

“Point taken.” He said softly. “I do not wish to become destructive to more innocent people… I have already done enough.”

“So we’re just going to sit here?” Tasuki raised an eyebrow. “On the

off-chance that Mitsukake might come out, we're going to sit here and what, set up camp? Besiege the city? Huddle under your barrier for the next few days? I didn't think we had that kind of time… the way you were talkin' before, it sounded like this was somethin' we ought to be solving now."

"It is." Chichiri acknowledged. "But don't you feel it? It's all over this place — thick with darkness and sadness and negativity. It's not a safe place for anyone to linger… which may well be why the people of Choukou have taken to hiding in their homes. They're not willing to risk it either — if they're even able to escape it at all."

"Do you think this is connected to Mitsukake?" Hotohori asked softly. Chichiri shrugged.

"Maybe." He agreed. "But the atmosphere is too thick and cloying for me to get a clear fix on his movements. I'm pretty sure he's here — in or around Choukou. But that's as good as I can get."

"It's a pity you lost that damn cat of his, between leaving Taikyoku-zan and getting to our mountain." Tasuki reflected. "We could've sent it in instead, and let it sniff him out."

"Cat?" Aidou blinked, and Chichiri frowned.

"Tama." He agreed. "But it's as Tasuki said. He disappeared somewhere between us leaving Taikyoku-zan and our return to Reikaku-zan. I don't know where he went or what happened to him — but I suppose I assumed he'd gone to find the reborn Mitsukake. However, since Mitsukake hasn't been reborn, I guess I really have no idea where he went."

"Speak of the devil!" Tasuki let out an exclamation, grabbing Chichiri's sleeve and waving an excited hand in the direction of the Choukou city entrance. A lone figure had emerged from the darkened streets, and as he stepped into the brighter daylight of the surrounding landscape, Hotohori gasped.

"Mitsukake!" He breathed. "Do you think he sensed us coming, then? Was he drawn here by our presence after all?"

"Must've been." Tasuki grinned. "All right, that solves us a problem. Yo, Mitsukake — we've been looking for you!"

The tall, broad figure did not react, as if completely unaware of Tasuki's call, and the bandit frowned, folding his arms across his chest.

"Hey, you great big oaf, pay attention, will you?" He exclaimed.

“Are you blind or something? We’re talking to you!”

“Tasuki, wait.” Chichiri held out a hand, but Tasuki was not listening, and he sauntered forwards, stepping outside of Chichiri’s barrier before the monk could stop him.

“Tasuki, get back here!” Chichiri yelled, but Tasuki took no notice, loping across the uneven stony ground like a hunting wolf as he closed in on his prey.

“Snap out of it, will ya?” He demanded, marching up to the silent figure and grabbing him firmly by the arm, giving him a shake. “We’ve come looking for you… it’s Tasuki and Chichiri and Hotohori-sama — your Seishi buddies! We need your help, so quit wasting your time around here, okay? For a start, my Pa’s bust his leg, and then we have to put the sky back together… or somethin’.”

The figure halted, staring at Tasuki blankly as if trying to work out what was going on. Tasuki groaned.

“Yeesh, are you even listening to me?” He snapped. “You’re a doctor, and someone needs your help — dammit, that’s all that’s usually needed to get you to pay attention. Stop spacin’ out on me, and get a grip, will you? We don’t have time to waste.”

“Tasuki, get away from him! Get back!” Chichiri’s frantic voice pierced the air at this, a note of urgency in it, and Tasuki turned to cast his friend a bewildered look.

“You said we came for Mitsukake — Chichiri, I ain’t leavin’ him in a place like this. Not considerin’ the state of this dump.” He said categorically. “We need him, an’ besides, being so near the place his girlfriend copped it’s bound to be screwin’ with his brain. He’s one of us so he’s comin’ with us — besides, what are you so manic about? This *is* Mitsukake, right?”

“He is but he isn’t. He isn’t himself!” Chichiri bit his lip, a troubled look on his face. “Tasuki, I mean it — get back here! Let me handle Mitsukake — *it isn’t safe*!”

At the sound of Chichiri’s desperate shout, Mitsukake seemed to flinch slightly, as if he had heard the monk’s words from deep within his strange, stupor-like state. He glanced at Tasuki, a strange, unreadable expression in his eyes, and then turned, moving back towards the city he had just left behind. Tasuki, paying no attention to Chichiri’s urgent calls, let out a sigh of frustration, reaching out a brawny fist to haul his friend back.

“Look, I’m talking to you.” He said firmly. “Didn’t you hear a word

of what I said, you dumb ape? Some friend you are, if you don't even remember your ol' buddy Tasuki when he's standing right in front of you. This is stupid, and we both know it. We're Seishi and that ain't changed, even if you are feelin' messed up inside. Jus' come with me already, okay? We'll help you figure it out — and we need your help."

A flicker of fear touched Mitsukake's glazed expression for a moment, and he took a faltering step back, eying Tasuki as if he were some kind of demon. As Tasuki made to physically drag him back towards Chichiri's barrier, he flung out his left hand as if to protect himself from harm. As his palm made contact with his companion's torso, there was a flare of red light and Tasuki went flying backwards, hitting the ground with a resounding thud.

"Genrou!" Anzu darted forwards, but Chichiri grabbed her by the arm, fixing her with a severe look.

"Stay where you are!" He snapped, his tones uncharacteristically harried and anxious.

"What the hell was that for?" Tasuki picked himself up, dusting his body down as he glared at the broad physician indignantly. "I don't wanna start blazin' my friends, but seriously, if you're gonna be a jerk about it…"

Mitsukake let out a murmur, his expression one of sudden alarm, and Tasuki frowned, as he caught the faint sound of his friend's fiancee's name.

"Shouka?" He repeated. "Shit, that again? She's dead, goddammit — will you let it *go* already?"

Mitsukake gazed down at his hand, genuine fear in his eyes as he clapped his right palm over his left. He cast Tasuki a troubled glance, and for an instant, Tasuki saw his friend's true self mirrored in the man's glassy eyes. Then he turned on his heel, fleeing into the city, and Tasuki swore softly under his breath.

"What the hell is *wrong* with him?" He demanded. "I was sure that he'd recognise me."

"Tasuki, get back here. Get back here *right now*!" Chichiri's voice made him turn, and as he did so, the monk's form hazed into view beside him, grabbing him firmly around the arms and dragging him away from the city gates. "We're going back. We're going back and we're getting out of this place. I can't keep holding the barrier indefinitely."

"You said that we should be able to find them and reach them,

right? Like you did Hotohori?" Tasuki demanded, as the monk strengthened his spell, drawing them all away from the cursed town and re-materialising them on the banks of a fast-flowing river, some miles from Choukou's dull, misty atmosphere. "So what was that about? And now we're running away? Chichiri!"

"We're not running away. We're making a tactical withdrawal to work out plan B." Chichiri dropped down onto the grass with a sigh, rubbing his temples as he did so. "Tasuki, I told you not to break out of my barrier… We don't know what the situation is regarding Mitsukake at the moment, but it was a reckless thing to do."

"Why?" Tasuki protested. "Is it such a bad thing, not wanting to leave the guy there? He was freaking out big time anyway — maybe you didn't hear him, but I did — he was muttering to himself about Shouka. Stayin' in that place is just going to make him a worse basket-case than he already is — it's *hurtin*' him, dammit. What kind of friends are we to take off and jus' leave him there like that!"

"We didn't have a choice." Chichiri said wearily. "I told you something was wrong in that town. You should listen to me. We will go back — at least, I think we'll have to. But for now we need to regroup."

"Genrou, are you all right?" Anzu asked hesitantly, and Tasuki glanced at her, nodding his head.

"Why wouldn't I be?" He asked, confused.

"He pushed you back… that red light… you fell." Anzu frowned. "I was just… you're not hurt?"

"Takes more than a little shove to hurt me, even coming from a hulk like Mitsukake." Tasuki sent her a wolfish smile. "Stop looking so pathetic, Anzu. I'm fine. I just fell, that's all."

Chichiri cast his friend a thoughtful, troubled look, but he made no remark. Instead he glanced up at the sky.

"I need to try and think of a way to break through to him. The way I did with Hotohori-sama." He said softly. "That atmosphere clogs my magic and makes any kind of spell difficult to weave — that's why we had to leave so abruptly. You might not have been affected, Tasuki-kun — but I think that ambience would have hurt Anzu and Aidou, if we'd remained there too much longer. They don't have Suzaku's power to cling to like we do — it was better to be safe than sorry."

"But we're still no further ahead, and now we know Mitsukake's in trouble but we're doing nothing about it." Tasuki hauled himself to his

feet. “That ain’t right, however you look at it. We should’a at least brought him with us.”

“Perhaps.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “I don’t know. Right now, Tasuki, I really don’t know.”

“Where are we now, anyway?” Aidou glanced around her, spreading out her skirts on the ground as she made herself comfortable. “All this transferring and magic and everything — I don’t even know which part of Kounan we’re in now. Or if we’re even in Kounan at all.”

“We are.” Chichiri confirmed. “We’re about six miles south of Choukou — not too far from my old village. I thought it best to aim for safe territory — somewhere I knew well.”

He stood, gesturing to the trees behind them.

“This used to be farmland, but after the Shouryuu flooded this land, it was abandoned as too high risk.” He added. “This isn’t the season for heavy rain, though, and the farm buildings are still here, even if they are a little bit derelict these days. They should be enough for us to use, if nothing else — while I try and work out what exactly we can do about Mitsukake.”

“So this is the *Shouryuu* river?” Tasuki glanced at the flowing water, then back up at the monk. “The same river that your…?”

“Yes, Tasuki. The same one.” Chichiri cut across him, his tones making it clear that he did not want to discuss the matter any further. “But like I said, even as fast as it’s moving now, it won’t flood today. It takes exceptional weather and a reverse tide to cause havoc and mayhem on the surrounding area… we’re quite safe being here.”

“And in a river like this there’s bound to be fish.” Aidou said matter-of-factly. “Where is this farm exactly, Chichiri-san? If it’s really nearby, I’m sure Anzu and I can probably prepare something by way of lunch, and it will be nice to have a roof over our heads, even if it is in the form of an abandoned property.”

“It’s literally just beyond that line of trees. No more than two hundred yards, but it’s hidden by the boughs.” Chichiri said with a smile. “And that would be nice, if you girls don’t mind.”

“At least it’s something productive to do.” Aidou nodded, casting Anzu a meaningful glance. “Well? Are you coming, then? Or are you going to sit here and stare at Shun’u like you expect him to grow another leg or something?”

Anzu started out of her daze, reddening as she scrambled to her feet.

“I’ll come.” She said, embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I was… miles away.”

“I suppose this means you’ll want me to hoick more creatures out of the water?” Chichiri asked, and Aidou eyed him for a moment, then shook her head.

“I’ll manage myself.” She said evenly. “You’re not very good at killing fish, Chichiri-san. And besides, you said you wanted to focus on helping your friend. No, leave the food to us… it’s probably a quicker option all round, if we want to eat at all.”

With that she took Anzu by the arm, leading her off into the trees, and Tasuki smirked.

“You see, she’s not all sweetness and light.” He said frankly.

“Well, at least she’s confident in what she can do.” Chichiri shrugged. “She’s probably right, too. I have no desire to kill any fish right at the moment — I’m too preoccupied with that town and Mitsukake’s expression when he looked at you that last time. If she and Anzu can take care of our stomachs, I can put my mind to other things.”

“It’s times like this that we miss Nuriko.” Hotohori reflected. “He was quite good at cooking, if I remember right.”

“Nuriko.” Chichiri’s brow creased, and Tasuki shot him a sidelong glance.

“Something we should know about?” He asked. Chichiri hesitated, then shook his head.

“No.” He admitted. “But then, right now, I can’t feel Mitsukake, either. Even knowing exactly where he is, I can’t pick him up. I guess my senses need a rest — for a second I did think Nuriko’s chi brushed against my thoughts, but now it’s gone again.”

“Typical Nuriko. Always causin’ twice as much trouble.” Tasuki flopped back on the grass. “But you think you can cast somethin’ over Mitsukake and get him to wake up?”

“Choukou’s atmosphere saps my strength. If he were away from there, maybe — but whilst he’s there, I don’t know if I can reach him.” Chichiri admitted. “I can guard against it all — the negativity and whatever else. But it takes more of my power to do it, so I have less for other things.”

“And that’s why we withdrew.” Hotohori mused. “Tasuki, I’m relieved you weren’t hurt. If poor Mitsukake is in anything like the kind of distress I was… it was fortunate indeed.”

At this, Chichiri’s gaze flitted back in Tasuki’s direction, and his lips thinned for a moment, as if trying to work something out. Tasuki frowned, cocking his head on one side as he stared at his friend.

“What?” He demanded. “Why are you lookin’ at me like that?”

“No reason.” Chichiri shook his head. “Really. If you’re all right, then it’s fine. Like Hotohori-sama said — if you’re not hurt, then it’s a relief.”

“I’m fine.” Tasuki assured him. “A little flick from Mitsukake isn’t going to hurt me, come on. From Nuriko, maybe, but I’ve survived my fair share of those in my time. Mitsukake wouldn’t hurt a fly — he ran away from me, rather than try and fight me. You really do worry too much, sometimes — quit gawking at me like that and focus on a way to help *him*, instead. After all, right now we’re still down to three Shichi Seishi… and you said yourself, we don’t have time to lose!”

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

A faint breeze blew around the uneven, hilly landscape as the solitary figure made his way slowly and hesitantly up towards the barrel-trunked elm tree that stood overlooking the city below. The area was deserted, and the landscape empty except for the two identical grave-markers that stood under the protection of the heavy branches, leaves and stray pieces of tree-bark littering the surrounding area. As he drew closer, the man registered the presence of fresh flowers beside each of the graves, and for some reason, this jarred something in his heart as he sank slowly to his knees before the nearest stone.

It was more worn than the other, having spent longer at the mercy of the elements, but the characters that comprised the woman's name were still clearly defined in the rock and he ran the fingers of his right hand across the carving, pain in his heart.

"Kaku Shouka." He whispered the words faintly, and as if someone had heard him, the wind teased and toyed with the leaves that scattered across the ground at his feet. For a moment he sat there, resting his hand against the stone as if by some miracle he could use it to communicate with the long dead spirit, but there was no gentle voice on the wind, and the man knew that he was entirely alone.

The newer, more polished stone of the other grave marker caught his attention and he shuffled his large form across to look at it properly. As he ran his eyes down the inscription, something clenched inside of his heart, and he bit his lip, softly murmuring the name.

"Myou Juan." He breathed, and almost as if he had been stabbed, a rush of memories and sensations washed through him, disjointed, disconnected and disorientating as he clutched his hands to his head, fighting to stave them off. At length he managed it, raising his eyes once more in trepidation to the rock and fingering absently the petals of the blossoms that lay before it. They had not been there more than a day, and although he could not place a name or a face to credit the gentle offering with, he knew somehow in his heart that they had been left by a friend.

By someone who, once, he had considered both like a friend and a brother.

For a moment he sat there, trying to make sense of the conflicting sensations that welled up inside of him. Then, as he gazed at the newer stone a second time, a fresh memory pierced his mind, as in the midst of the fog and confusion, the face of a young man, dressed in showy clothing and with a shock of red hair became vivid in his thoughts. As the impulse became clearer, the man found his thoughts engulfed in bright, angry flames as someone pushed forward, clutching a red vial in his hands as he sought to bring relief to a huddled, cloak-covered figure on the ground.

With a jolt, the man realised that the would-be saviour had been him.

"Mit… su… kake." He said softly, brushing his left hand over the second gravestone as his palm burned and stung in recognition of his words. Glancing down at it, he felt a sense of regret and apprehension, as the jagged red character became once more visible on his palm.

"This hand…" He murmured, holding it up to the light. "This mark…"

He faltered, as a stab of anguish shot through him and for the first time he saw clearly the looming figures that had accosted him earlier near the cloud-cursed town of Choukou. Instead of the face of his beloved Shouka, he found himself visualising the approach of the red-haired man, his attempt to reach out in friendship, and the bright red gleam of light that his own frightened reaction had caused.

Instinctively, Mitsukake understood what the jumbled mess of images meant.

"I *hurt* someone?" He whispered. "But… this hand… is the hand… of a healer?"

He cast a final glance at the grave, the redheaded man's face still burned into his mind as he struggled to put a name to the features.

"Myou Juan." He reflected, and in that moment knew beyond all doubt that the occupant of the second grave was him. Strangely, this thought brought him neither comfort nor distress. His desperate, muddled mind clung instead to the fleeting memories of earlier that day, picking out and piecing painstakingly together the events that were real in amongst the nightmares that were not.

At length he stood, pulling his sash loose from his clothing and tearing it in two, binding half of it firmly around the hand that bore the odd red mark.

"I must leave this place." He murmured. "Before I bring someone

else pain. I must find… something. Some*one*. I don't know what… but I must… I must leave. I must find… someone I can call… a friend? And I must… I must reverse the damage… I must repair the thing I did to cause harm. I *must*!"

He clenched his fists as the mark on his left palm burned into his skin once more.

"*Tasuki*." He whispered, and suddenly he knew that this was the name of the man who had reached out to him in friendship, despite the darkness surrounding him.

"I must… find… Tasuki."

"Well, this place has survived pretty well, you know."

Chichiri pushed open the door of the old farmhouse, casting a rueful smile at the waiting Aidou and Anzu as he did so. "And you seem to have made yourselves at home… I suppose this is familiar territory for you, Aidou-san."

"Yes…" Aidou hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head. "Though it was Anzu who caught the fish this time — and there's plenty… so long as you're not sick of eating freshwater fish cooked over a makeshift fire."

"I think I need the strength, after this morning." Chichiri admitted. "Tasuki too, probably. I still haven't figured out what to do about Mitsukake, and it's preying on my mind a little. Thank you for feeding us."

"Men are helpless sometimes." Aidou rolled her eyes, but a smile touched her lips as she gestured to the door beyond. "It's a mess in there, but there is the remains of a table, and it will do. And as I said before — we have a roof over our heads, even if it is saturated with spiderwebs."

"Please tell me they're not part of the meal." Tasuki sent his sister a wary look, and Aidou flexed her fingers, causing him to duck back out of her way. "Hey, it was just a damn question!"

"Where's Hotohori-sama?" Anzu asked, glancing around her for any sign of the former Emperor. "Is he not coming inside?"

"It seems he really doesn't need to eat, and he's not at all affected by this morning." Chichiri shook his head. "He elected to stay outside by the water — I think he was just enjoying the view. Even when he was alive, he didn't get a lot of time to just sit still — I decided we'd

leave him to it."

He shrugged.

"Besides, I don't think he likes being reminded of the fact he's dead. Even though it's beyond dispute."

"He shouldn't have been so willing to charge that bastard Nakago then, in that case." Tasuki muttered, dropping down at the table with bad grace as he did so. "I still think we should be headin' back to Choukou, not squatting here like we're afraid of a little mist. Hotohori-sama and I have been inside of Choukou before… it's not as scary as all that. Even when Shouka was walking the streets waking the dead and making them zombies, we still handled it. You're being over cautious, Chichiri. What can mist do to you?"

Chichiri pursed his lips, but did not answer. Instead he settled himself down opposite, accepting the fish that Aidou offered him with a warm smile.

"Thank you." He said sincerely. "Miaka used to say that fish was considered brain food in her world. In which case, I need as much of it as I can get at the moment."

"*Brain* food?" Tasuki blinked, and Aidou sighed.

"Maybe we didn't feed *him* enough." She said acerbically, jabbing her makeshift chopstick in the direction of her hapless brother. "But there's always time to catch up. Eat, Shun'u. It's only basic, but it's the best we could do. Besides, your girlfriend here helped — so don't stare at it like it fell from the rafters."

Tasuki's eyes went up to the beams above his head, taking in the rotten, uneven wood, and he grimaced.

"I damn well hope it didn't." He retorted. "And Anzu is *not* my girlfriend. Why do you have to needle me about everything, Oneechan? Yeesh. Moan, nag, moan. That's all you do and I'm sick of it. You hate it so much, go back to Reikaku-zan with Ma and Pa and let me alone."

"So you can get yourself killed? I don't think so." Aidou shook her head.

"What's wrong, Tasuki?" Chichiri cast his fellow Seishi a concerned look. "You aren't eating… that's unlike you."

"I'm not hungry." Tasuki said frankly, pushing the fish aside as he rested his chin in his hands. "I want to go back to Choukou. A guy doesn't walk out on his friend when his friend's in trouble, and I have

issues with that. You sit here, if you like — I want to go back."

"It's too far for you to walk." Chichiri shook her head. "At least, it isn't, but it will take you a while."

"Then I should start now." Tasuki made to get up, but Chichiri reached up to grab his arm, pulling him back down.

"Eat first." He instructed. "You'll need your strength before you take on anything in that town, Tasuki. I'm not kidding. Whatever you faced there before… it's better to cover all bases. And Anzu and Aidou did cook the fish for our benefit as well as their own. Ignoring that would be rude, you know?"

"Genrou, are you sure you're all right? You look a little pale." Anzu frowned, her brow creasing as she cast the bandit a glance, and Tasuki started, glaring at her as he nodded his head.

"I'm fine… why does everyone keep asking if I'm all right?" He demanded. "Can't a guy worry about his buddy's state of mind without gettin' the third degree?"

"Then eat your fish and shut up." Aidou said categorically. "You're not six years old, Shun'u. Stop throwing a tantrum and eat. The sooner you do, the sooner you and Chichiri-san can concoct some crazy, do-or-die scheme to save this friend of yours… but Chichiri-san is right. You need to keep your strength up. So eat. We didn't cook this so you could behave like a spoiled brat, you know."

"Besides, right now, we don't know how to help Mitsukake." Chichiri added, casting his friend a searching look as he did so. "So if you go back there, you won't be able to do anything. It's better we talk this over first… and have a definite plan."

Tasuki bristled.

"You're looking at me that weird way again." He snapped. "Stop it, will you?"

"Genrou!" Anzu's eyes became big with surprise. "Why are you shouting at Chichiri? He's right — and besides, you left there as much to protect Aidou-san and I as anything… isn't that important too? Now we've found this place, we should be safe enough here if you want to go back to Choukou. It's not so bad, really… why are you so upset about this?"

Tasuki clenched his fist, bringing it down on the broken table with a thump.

"Because Mitsukake's my *friend*." He emphasised. "And walking out

on a friend is not something I do."

"Me either, you know." Chichiri acknowledged. "I'm no happier about it than you are. I'm fond of Mitsukake too, and I'm worried as well. But rushing in isn't going to solve the problem. We need to find a way to get him away from Choukou. Then, if I can track him down, I might be able to cast a spell. But while he's in that town — I can't. And if you flame him with your tessen, you'll risk hurting him. Just because he's effectively dead, we don't know if he can feel pain in this form. You don't want to harm him further, do you?"

"No." Tasuki admitted. "But I still don't like it. That's all."

Chichiri sighed heavily, shaking his head, but he made no reply, turning his attention back to his fish.

Tasuki gazed down at his own helping, toying idly with it as he ran over his friend's words in his head. Mitsukake's haunted expression flickered at the back of his thoughts and he frowned, stabbing at the meat more brutally than was necessary and reluctantly putting the piece in his mouth.

"We'll go back to Choukou, Tasuki-kun." Chichiri said softly. "I promise we won't abandon him. Just give me some time to work this out, all right? We'll go back… but right now, I need to think."

Tasuki grimaced.

"Whatever." He said flatly. "I guess I'm outnumbered, and without your magic hat, I can't get back there any quicker than you would. So I guess I'm stuck with it, whether I like it or not."

"You must think a lot of this Mitsukake guy, Genrou." Anzu rested her chin in her hands, eying him curiously. "To be so worried about him."

"He's one of my fellow Seishi, and he's my friend. Do I need another reason?" Tasuki looked startled, and Anzu flushed, shaking her head at his sharp tones.

"No, of course not." She responded. "But still, I'm curious to know what he's like. I mean, really. If you want to save him that much, he must be a good person — even if he wasn't himself in the village. And after Hotohori-sama — I'd like to know."

"Mitsukake is a doctor. A healer, in every sense of the word." Chichiri said gravely. "He's a big man — and sometimes people fear him because of that. But he has the gentlest heart of anyone I've ever met. Animals, people, everyone — he would never turn away someone

who needed his help, be they friend or enemy. When he passed on, it was to help the war wounded by giving them his strength — even though he was injured himself. He sacrificed his life to save a baby girl, and to heal the soldiers who were being tended in a village near the palace."

He frowned, gathering his composure, and sending him a sidelong glance, Tasuki realised he was remembering the event in question.

"I never saw a man do anything so selfless as that." The monk admitted. "To save soldiers on *both* sides, because they were people who were hurting… I felt ashamed that we were involved in a war, at that point. That we were doing our best to destroy Kutou as surely as they were us. And… and that Mitsukake helped the soldiers all, regardless of the colours on their uniforms… I guess I realised then what a person he really was, you know? He was… a close friend, and we shared a common heritage, living in this area. But there was something greater about him — an understanding of the value of life that even with all my training, I don't think I've ever quite reached."

"He sounds impossible." Aidou reflected. "There isn't anyone in the known universe who's that good and that self-sacrificing."

"You shut up." Tasuki snapped. "If it wasn't for Mitsukake, I'd be dead now, so you keep your random ramblings to yourself until you know what you're talking about."

"Mitsukake saved *you* once, Genrou?" Anzu looked startled. Tasuki nodded.

"He did." He agreed, as flickers of unpleasant memory stirred within him. "I wouldn't have made it, without his healin' powers."

Aidou frowned, biting her lip, and Tasuki dropped the rough wooden chopsticks down on the table.

"I'm done already." He said frankly. "Hurry up, Chichiri. I want to go back, so eat and think quicker, okay?"

"All right, already, I'm doing my best." Chichiri reproached. "Yelling at me won't help anything, you know."

"You're not going to waste that?" Aidou demanded.

"I told you. I'm done." Tasuki snapped back at her. "Do I have to repeat everything? Yeesh. Eat it yourself, if you're that hungry. I've lost my appetite."

He got to his feet, brushing Chichiri's arm aside as the monk made an effort to stop him.

“Leave me, will you? I’ll wait for you, if it’s about Choukou — so long as you don’t take too long. But I want some air and some time to think. Even I need to do that sometimes, you know — so you eat and let me alone.”

With which parting shot he left the room, swinging the door back behind him as he stepped out into the daylight. Between the trees he could see the faint glint of the river, glittering as it caught the rays of the midday sun, and something in the dancing, skittish light made him suddenly feel giddy. He swallowed hard, dots dancing before his eyes as he fought to get a control on himself.

“Shit, maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t eat more of Aidou’s cooking.” He muttered, making his way slowly towards the trees and then pausing, glancing up at the faint wisps of cloud that dotted the sky. “I hope Chichiri ain’t gonna take too long thinking about this. Without Mitsukake, I would have… after the incident with Miaka… without him I wouldn’t be here. It feels wrong to just damn well abandon him, when I owe him my life.”

He swallowed again, his throat feeling unnaturally dry, and he sighed, rubbing his temples as he felt a dull throbbing ache beginning in the depths of his skull.

“This whole thing is beyond me.” He reasoned out loud. “Mitsukake was like a zombie. I mean, he *is* a zombie — he’s living dead, so I guess that’s a given. But even so… even so…”

“Genrou?”

Anzu’s voice came from behind him and he turned, cursing as he met her concerned gaze with a defiant one of his own.

“What?” He demanded. “Didn’t you hear me already? I said I wanted to be alone.”

“I know.” Anzu hesitated for a moment, then she seemed to make up her mind, taking a step or two towards him. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay… and to say sorry, if I said something that offended you, that’s all.”

“If you feel that way, then listen to me and go away, huh?” Tasuki said tiredly. “Please, Anzu. Just go already, huh? This isn’t something you can understand. It’s a Seishi thing — it’s way out of your league.”

“I… I guess so.” Anzu faltered, falling silent, but she made no move to leave, and Tasuki groaned.

“Fine. Then *I’m* going to go. Damn women.” He muttered, trying to

ignore the sudden, random tightness in his chest as he made to move away from the little clearing of land. As he took a step or two towards the river, however, something sharp and stabbing lurched up inside of him, gripping itself tightly around his heart as, for the briefest of instants, he felt certain it would stifle its lifebeat completely. Anzu forgotten, he let out a gasp, his hands going to his chest as he stumbled to his knees. Somewhere, seeming very far away all of a sudden, he heard someone yelling his name, and then commotion from the delapidated property behind him. A suffocating sensation of heat and pain washed over him in waves, as the world blurred and swam in a strange red light and he struggled to draw breath into his lungs, feeling sick and dizzy as his surroundings swayed and twisted. He muttered a curse as the pain stabbed through him again, screwing up his eyes as he sought to bring his body under some kind of control.

"Dammit." He whispered hoarsely. "What the hell…?"

"*Genrou*!" Now the voice was closer, and Tasuki drew deep, painful breaths into his lungs as he put his strength into warding away the sudden attack. Panic welled inside of him as he struggled for air, but he fought valiently against it, forcing oxygen into his body as he managed, at last, to regain scant threads of his composure.

"Chichiri! Hotohori-sama! Genrou's hurt!"

The voice pierced through his aching head, and for a moment he felt as if something surged and rippled within him.

"Tasuki? Tasuki, what's wrong?"

That was Chichiri and Tasuki struggled to focus on his friend's voice as a second wave of panic rushed through his body. He closed his eyes, swallowing against the bitter bile that rose in his throat, and as he did so, he felt something reach out to him, as if trying to help him in his fight against the sudden onslaught. His nerves ragged and set on edge, he raised his gaze, meeting Chichiri's troubled look with unreadable bronze eyes, and he knew that the sensation had come from his friend, as if the other man had intuitively cast some kind of spell to bring him relief. He heard the monk utter a curse, and absently he realised that, in different circumstances, the idea of Chichiri swearing would have brought him any amount of amusement. At that moment, however, he felt dead to everything, and even the flicker of genuine concern in the sorcerer's gaze could not elicit anything more from him than basic, dulled recognition.

The pain returned at that moment, and he grimaced, spreading his fingers over his ribcage as if he could somehow pull the cause of the

sensation out of his body with his bare hands. The world swam and twisted again, and he heard Chichiri shout something at someone else nearby — although his friend's words were blurred and confused in his brain.

As he closed his eyes against the surging pulses that wracked through his body, he had another fleeting image of Mitsukake's expression, before they had left Choukou. Then, in the deepest, darkest recesses of his mind, another memory flared into life, becoming brighter and more vivid with every passing second. He tried to force it back, but it forged through his weakened defences relentlessly, and for a moment, the face of a young woman in tears confronted him.

Even in his dizzy, disorientated state, Tasuki knew all too well to whom the face belonged, and what memory had reared its ugly head against him, even in his time of weakness.

The face of Yuuki Miaka.

Suzaku no Miko.

Random Babble:

In Sanbou Den, Mitsukake and Shouka were buried beneath an elm tree overlooking the northern town of Souen. In Kanji, I guess it's less easy to get confused, however in roman lettering Souen and Souun are a lot alike, and I don't want people to get muddled. (Souun being the western mountain town sandwiched between Reikaku-zan and Kaou-zan.) Hence, I've left out the name of the northern town and kept the burial as being in the Choukou vicinity (which it is, since Mitsukake lived not far from Choukou when all of the Shouka stuff happened). Sanbou Den also mentions that Mitsukake's childhood friend Gou Kyuushin and his wife Suisen often visit the two graves to leave flowers — proving that the two lovers truly haven't been forgotten :)

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

“I feel like I’ve taken a step back in time.”

Nuriko examined his reflection in the mirror, pursing his lips as laughter danced in his vivid dark eyes. “Tamatama, you really have a gift for this, you know. I’m sure there are transvestites enough in Eiyou for you to make a career of this makeover thing, if you wanted to. I look like a new woman.”

“Well, that was the idea.” Tamatama laughed, although there was still a flicker of regret in his eyes as he gazed at his friend. “You’re like noone else I’ve ever met, Nuriko… but most of all, your figure is sickening. You can get away with so much, with your features — with my help, you could pass as a woman forever and noone would ever ask any questions.”

“It’s strange, but it feels nostalgic.” Nuriko touched his cheek, shrugging his shoulders. “I didn’t get a chance to be very much the girl when Miaka was here. In fact…”

He faltered, then sighed.

“I’m not quite sure how I felt about Miaka.” He admitted at length. “But she was the first and probably the only person to make me think or act at all like a man. Now she’s gone… I feel… like a girl again. It’s strange, but dressing like this seems the right thing to do. Not because I’m trying to be Kourin any more — but because this is Ryuuen, after all. I think.”

“Well, Ryuuen or Kourin, you’ve still got a sickening figure for a transvestite.” Tamatama sighed, shaking his head in resignation. “You’re a dream model to work with, you know… where will I find anyone quite so ravishing for my next project, huh?”

Nuriko laughed, nodding his head.

“It’s all right.” He asssured his friend. “You like a challenge.”

He turned back to his reflection, eying himself critically.

“I wonder if I’ll be as pretty as this in the next life.” He mused. “I’m seriously considering coming back as a girl, you know. And giving it a proper shot.”

“You get to choose?” Tamatama stared, and Nuriko grinned impishly.

“That’s a perk of dying in the service of the Miko and the Beast God.” He agreed lightly. “When whatever this is is resolved… I’ll be able to choose my next incarnation. What do you think? I think it would be an adventure. I’ve spent so much of this life being girlish — and I’ve liked living that way. There are a lot more things that make sense to me about girls than about boys, in the final analysis. Maybe I’d be happier if I started over as a female.”

He pursed his lips, looking pensive.

“Maybe then *he*’d notice me, if I was a girl.” He added cryptically, reaching up to brush a faint smudge of makeup from his cheek. “After all, he *did* marry Houki, and she and I do look alike… surely, if I was a girl next time, he’d not be able to resist me.”

“Woah, girl. He?” Tamatama blinked, and Nuriko laughed.

“The beautiful man I told you about.” He said with a shrug. “Hotohori… the former Emperor of Kounan. Thanks to your pampering, I spent a year in his harem undetected… I never meant to fall in love with the Emperor, but it was something I couldn’t help. And now we’re both dead, it makes me wonder. I mean, when I died, I did my best to push him in the direction of my friend Houki — because she was the only woman in the harem worthy of his attention, besides me. But now he’s dead too — we’ll both be reborn. And maybe next time around… it will be my turn.”

“A year, huh.” Tamatama looked impressed. “I trained you better than I thought… and he didn’t even realise?”

“Well, he didn’t honestly spend much time in the harem. If any time at all. He’s a man of too much honour.” Nuriko shrugged his shoulders. “But I am serious, you know. If I’m very clever… I might manage to secure him in the next life, even if not in this.”

He winked, mischief in his eyes.

“Worth a try, right?”

“Oh, I’ve missed you in Yukigase.” Tamatama laughed. “And I’m going to miss you again, when you… go. I should have travelled away from the village sooner… it seems such a short space of time, now we’ve rekindled our friendship. And then you’ll be born again, and you’ll forget everything and everyone you ever knew in this life.”

“Maybe.” Nuriko looked thoughtful for a moment. “But I think it’ll

still be there — somewhere inside of me. Otherwise, why do people make connections? I might not remember you in the next life, Tamatama, but you and my other friends will still be part of who I am. It's just how it is. Miaka too — even though I'll probably never see her or Tamahome again, now. They're part of me, somewhere… and I think that will be true, even in the next life."

He laughed, the moment of solemnity gone.

"But we're getting serious again." He scolded. "And I imagine there's enough of that to come, when we reach Eiyou. So let's not, huh? Are we travelling on today, or what?"

"The only carriage going the right way left an hour ago, and it was full — I asked that lecherous young man downstairs." Tamatama admitted, and Nuriko fixed him with a searching look.

"It was full, or you want to delay me getting to Eiyou now you know what it means?"

"Both." Tamatama owned, looking sheepish. "But I know you have to go there… it's all right. I won't stall you forever. I just thought, while there's a little time…"

"I guess so." Nuriko's eyes softened, and he nodded, grabbing his friend by the hand and leading him towards the door of the small chamber. "Then we'll go out into the city and see the sights, all right? I want to show myself off to the crowds, and you always catch people's eyes wherever you go — let's go out there and be noticed, huh?"

"I catch people's eyes all right, but not in the same way as you." Tamatama said dryly, as he allowed himself to be hauled out of the room and down the stairs. "What it must be to be born svelte."

Nuriko chuckled.

"Delicate and yet so strong inside." He teased. "At that rate, I should be every man's dream, shouldn't I? The perfect woman."

"Don't push it." Tamatama's eyes twinkled with humour. "Last fling or not, I'm not going to stroke your ego any more than it already has been. You don't need me to compliment you on your looks, you know. You just spent a half hour examining your reflection in minute detail. You know you're beautiful, even with your hair short."

"I guess I picked up one too many bad habits from living around Hotohori-sama." Nuriko said sheepishly.

They stepped out onto the main street, heading down the centre of

the small town. It was not as busy as the place where Nuriko had saved the life of the little girl, but there were people around, and as they past, heads turned and nudged together in whispers at the sight of the beautiful young woman and her unusually attired companion.

“Do folk stare like that in Eiyou, by the way?” Tamatama asked curiously. Nuriko shrugged.

“I don’t know.” He admitted. “When I was growing up, people got used to me being, well, me. I won’t pretend they liked it, but the neighbours all knew that I was Ryuuen, even though I dressed like Kourin. Maybe they whispered behind my back… but noone was really… unpleasant about it. Not to my face.”

He frowned.

“I don’t know whether my family took worse than I did over it.” He added. “Sometimes, there are things Rokou said to me in the past that I stop and think about… and I wonder about that. Still, as Nuriko, I made them proud… so I know that they’ve something to cling on to, even if it’s wrapped in the memory of their cross-dressing younger son.”

“Rokou is your brother?”

“Yes.” Nuriko agreed. “Sometimes I wonder if he was actually the strong one, in the end. I always saw him as a coward — a weakling who I defended from bullies and whose messes I always had to sort out. But when Kourin died, he didn’t lose himself in grief like I did. And now I’ve gone, too, he’s still able to find the strength to move on and live his life. I underestimated him, but he had more strength than I realised. And he must have seen Mother and Father suffer for my actions more than I ever did.”

“Does he look like you?” Tamatama asked speculatively, and Nuriko gurgled, reading the implications of his companion’s words.

“Yes, somewhat, but if you start making a move on him he might die of fright.” He said with an amused chuckle. “Whenever someone suggested a marriage alliance between him and the daughter of any of Father’s associates, he about became apopleptic and clean hid from sight if he could. I don’t think he’d know how to handle it… even from a real woman.”

“Pity.” Tamatama joined in the laughter. “Because if he’s anywhere near as pretty as you, I might have paid him a visit.”

He paused, sending his friend a sidelong glance.

“Hell, I might yet. Your people run a fabic emporium, after all — and they say Eiyou is the best place to get good material.”

Nuriko giggled appreciatively.

“I almost wish I could be there to see it, but I doubt I will.” He said regretfully. “I promised myself not to go home again, now. I did — once — with Miaka, as a spirit, when we had to find something that was hidden around the property. But it upset Rokou-nii — and to be honest, I don’t want to keep dragging his thoughts back. He won’t move on if he sees me everywhere he looks, just like I didn’t move on when Kourin died. So much as I’d like to see it — when we get to Eiyou, I won’t be going to the textile quarter.”

“Pity, but I understand your reasoning.” Tamatama reflected. “I was going to offer to convey a message to your people, but if that’s how you feel…”

“There’s nothing I need to say to them.” Nuriko shook his head, glancing up at the sky. “I think they know all they need to know… that I love them and I’m sorry for the things I’ve done to hurt them. Any more would just be prolonging the pain… even considering what a terrible son I was, they did love me a good deal, you know. More than I probably deserved, in the end. I won’t be selfish… I’ve said my goodbyes.”

“You’re a sickeningly good person sometimes, you know that?”

“Well, if I am, it’s also because of spending too much time around Hotohori-sama.” Nuriko said ruefully. “I’m just trying to think as someone who’s leaving his regrets behind. That’s all. Talking to Kourin healed more than just my missing memories… it’s hard to explain, but everything makes more sense now.”

“Speaking of making sense or otherwise, what do you suppose is going on up there?”

Tamatama jerked a thick, polished finger towards a commotion up ahead, not far from the entrance to the town. A cluster of people had begun to gather around something or someone on the ground, and Nuriko frowned, a sudden flicker of something darting across his senses. He grabbed his friend by the hand, quickening his pace as he approached the gathering.

“K… Nuriko?” Tamatama cast him a startled look. “What? Do you see something?”

“No… I feel something.” Nuriko looked as non-plussed as his companion. “Briefly. I thought…”

He faltered, as they reached the back of the growing mass of bodies, and he glanced at his hands, pursing his lips as he slipped them between two bulky townsmen, pushing them aside as if they were no more than feathers on the wind.

“Coming through.” She said cheerfully, as one man stumbled back, almost knocking over a second, and the other tripped over his own feet in an attempt to regain his balance. “Whoops — sorry about that. Guess I don’t know my own strength!”

As they pushed through the crowd, Nuriko was once more aware of the vague sensation crossing his senses, and as they reached the front, his eyes widened as he realised the cause of the disturbance. A man was crouched on the ground, his face pale and his eyes bright with alarm and consternation. Though it was clear he had collapsed in some way, and that he was too weak to get back to his feet, he was refusing to let anyone near him, and as his eyes rested on the stranger’s face, recognition flared in Nuriko’s heart.

“Mitsukake.” He breathed, and at the sound of his name, the man raised his head, looking straight at Nuriko with first shock and then comprehension.

For a moment, nothing moved, then Nuriko stepped briskly forward, taking his friend by the arms and pulling him firmly to his feet.

“What the hell are *you* doing here, of all places?” He demanded, concern flickering in his expression as he registered how tired and drawn the physician appeared. “Have you been blitzing your power on healing people again, you idiot?”

Mitsukake could do nothing more than stare at his companion, and Nuriko sighed, tut-tutting under his breath as he turned to face the crowd.

“Nothing to see here — just a doctor who’s been working too many hours helping the sick, as usual.” He said pragmatically, taking Mitsukake firmly around the wrist and pulling him through the mass of people towards an open stretch of street. Having already experienced Nuriko’s strong touch, many of the townsfolk stepped back to allow them to pass, although a low murmur of conversation echoed behind them as they moved into a more secluded area of the town. Tamatama, having gauged his companion’s behaviour, was quick to follow, and soon it was just the three of them in a side-street, Nuriko casting Mitsukake an admonishing glare as the man sank back to the ground.

“What have you been doing this time?” He asked softly, crouching at the doctor’s side. “You’re dead, you know. You can’t go round healing the world — look at you.”

“Dead?” Tamatama looked startled, glancing from Nuriko to Mitsukake, and then back to Nuriko again. “You mean this is one of your…”

“Seishi friends. Yes.” Nuriko nodded. “Tamatama, this is Mitsukake. Myou Juan.”

“Mitsukake.” At this, the physician murmured his name, glancing at Nuriko afresh. “That is… truly who I am.”

“You’re way out of it, aren’t you?” Nuriko sighed. “Don’t you remember anything yet? What are you doing in this town — can you tell me that?”

“I…” Mitsukake faltered, rubbing his temples, and Nuriko sank back against the wall beside him with a sigh.

“Okay. Let’s start with something more basic.” He said softly. “Do you know who I am? When I said your name before, I thought you recognised me… but we won’t get anywhere unless you do.”

“Nuriko.” Mitsukake managed a weak smile, and Nuriko nodded.

“Good start. You know you’re Mitsukake and I’m Nuriko — so you’re better off than I was when I stumbled into Yukigase.” He reflected. “This is my friend Tamatama, by the way. He might look… unique, but he has a good heart… so you don’t need to look so apprehensive. I was going to Eiyou to track down the rest of you — but since you’re here, you and I might as well make the trip together.”

“Eiyou.” Mitsukake echoed the word, then he sighed heavily, shaking his head. “No. I can’t… I can’t go there. Not yet. I need… to find Tasuki.”

“Tasuki?” Nuriko looked startled. “So you know who he is, too… are you saying you’ve *seen* Tasuki? Recently? In this part of Kounan?”

“My thoughts are all so jumbled.” Mitsukake admitted. “And I feel so tired, as if a large part of my energy has been sucked away. I am not sure what I saw… but for some reason… I think…”

He hesitated, then glanced at his bandaged hand, holding it up before his face.

“You’ve wrapped your fist again.” Nuriko frowned. “Why? Mitsukake, what’s going on?”

“I think I hurt him. With this.” Mitsukake confessed, looking troubled. “I don’t know… how. But… I think… I think he came towards me. And I… I repelled him. With my hand.”

“But your Suzaku power is to heal. Not harm. That doesn’t make sense.” Nuriko shook his head. “It looks like you’re as disjointed as I was before Tamatama helped me — stop for a moment and think rationally, if you can. If you saw Tasuki — where did you see him? And was he alone?”

“I… don’t remember.” Mitsukake owned. “It is all interspersed with images of a woman. A woman named Shouka, who I think I once loved.”

“That would be an understatement.” Nuriko sighed, getting to his feet and pulling his broad companion up with him as if he were no more than a small child. “Right. So you think you saw Tasuki, that somehow you hurt him, but you don’t know how, where or if he was roaming the country alone. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I suppose it’s still a start.” Nuriko frowned, casting the bemused Tamatama a glance. “It’s a good thing we didn’t leave this morning, after all. He’s all in — and I think we should take him back to our room. Whatever happened to him, he’s as unsettled as I was when you first found me… maybe after some rest, he’ll be able to think more clearly.”

“You do know what that bar attendant will say if you turn up with a man on your arm.” Tamatama said frankly. “He already gives me doubtful looks… and even for a dead guy, this one’s not so shabby.”

“Tamatama.” Nuriko shook his head, but a faint smile twitched at his lips at his friend’s blunt assessment. “Not right now. Come give me a hand keeping him upright, huh? If anyone asks, we’ll tell them he drank too much, or something… but I think we should get him out of the streets.”

“But… Tasuki…” Mitsukake faltered, and Nuriko cast him a smile.

“We’re looking for Tasuki too. And Chichiri,and his Highness and Chiriko.” He assured his friend. “So we should stick together… we’re both after the same end. Tamatama? Do you mind?”

“No!” As the brawny transvestite came to take Mitsukake’s left arm, the doctor held up his hands, taking a step back and almost colliding with the wall of a nearby building. “Don’t… don’t touch me!”

“Mitsukake?” Nuriko stared at his companion uncomprehendingly, and Mitsukake slipped his right fist over his left one, shaking his head.

“I don’t know what I might do.” He said faintly. “This hand… even bound… there was a rat, and it… it died, just by touching my skin. And… and I think… Tasuki… I hurt Tasuki, somehow. Your friend is… not like us. He must not touch me… just in case.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” Nuriko eyed him in consternation. “You’re not kidding — you really do believe you did harm to Tasuki in some way.”

“The rat died when the mark appeared on my palm.” Mitsukake said softly. “And Tasuki… he fell… there was red light… he fell. I’m sure of it, Nuriko. And I don’t want to hurt… anyone else.”

“Then I guess I’ll manage you on my own, since I think it’s unlikely you can do much to hurt a fellow deadie.” Nuriko said decidedly, although he exchanged apprehensive glances with his transvestite companion. “Come on — back to the inn with us. Then you can rest and later, we’ll talk more clearly, when you’ve had time to regroup. Maybe if you can tell us where it was you saw Tasuki, we can find him more quickly.”

“Genrou!”

As Chichiri crouched at his friend’s side, the anxious circus performer hurried forward, fright in her dark eyes as she registered the look of pain on the bandit’s face.

“What’s wrong with him — what happened?”

“I was worried about this.” Chichiri said grimly, resting his hand gently on Tasuki’s arm. Slowly he rolled back the redhead’s sleeve, and Anzu gasped, realising that, despite his fighting for breath, her friend’s normally vivid Suzaku mark had faded almost to nothing against his skin. “When we left Choukou… I wasn’t sure. But he seemed all right, so I hoped, being Tasuki, that it wouldn’t…”

He trailed off, glancing around him, and Anzu made to take Tasuki’s hand, but the monk shook his head, warding her off.

“No, you mustn’t touch him.” He said urgently. “Hotohori-sama, will you help me? We need to get him inside… he can’t stay out here. Not like this.”

“I… I… I’m all right, dammit.” Tasuki himself gasped at that point, raising his head. “There’s no need to fuss yourself over me. I… I’m

fine.”

“Like hell you are!” Anzu exclaimed. “You just collapsed right in front of us — don’t try and pretend you’re all right, because it’s not true!”

“I told you. I’m fine.” Tasuki pushed Chichiri’s supporting arms back, struggling to his feet. “Just… indigestion, or something. That’s all it was.”

“How can you get indigestion when you barely ate a thing?” Aidou snapped, although Anzu could hear the anxiety in the older woman’s voice too. “Shun’u, stop being a baby and let Chichiri-san help you. Whatever’s wrong, you won’t fix it by throwing a temper tantrum about it!”

Tasuki took a couple of steps, then stumbled, and Hotohori darted forward, catching him as he met the growing concern in Chichiri’s gaze.

“Stop fighting us.” The swordsman said softly. “Let us help you.”

Tasuki swore softly, but he did not push the former Emperor away, and Chichiri came to support his other side as between them they helped their rebellious friend into the old farm cottage. Once there, he sank to the floor, and Chichiri bit his lip, brushing his fingers against Tasuki’s brow as the bandit flinched away from him.

“Hey, watch what you’re doing! You might be happy with only one eye, Chichiri, but I wanna keep both of mine!”

“Shut up and listen to me.” All the usual fun and mischief had gone from the monk’s voice and Anzu’s heart chilled to hear the seriousness of his tones. “Tasuki, you have a fever. You should have told me you weren’t feeling right — as it is, I don’t like the look of it. You need to stay here and rest, and I need to think… there was something bad hanging over Choukou, and I think it’s touched you. I hoped I’d got you away quickly enough, but I’m starting to think that I didn’t — that when Mitsukake made contact with you, it did more than just knock you back.”

“Mitsukake?” Hotohori looked alarmed, and Chichiri nodded.

Tasuki snorted.

“Don’t be stupid.” He snapped. “Mitsukake’s a doctor… what the hell would he have done to me?”

“And I was an Emperor, but I still attacked my former people without provocation.” Hotohori said gravely, a shadow touching his

beautiful eyes as he remembered. “Whatever force has brought us back to half-life, it comes at a price. I used my power to destroy instead of protect, when I did not know who I was or what I was attacking. Mitsukake… must be in the same position. He seeks to heal, but in fact…”

“He harms.” Chichiri’s gaze darkened. “Heika, I think you’ve hit the nail right on the head, you know? Tasuki said he mentioned Shouka, and you were stuck in a memory from your past, when first we found you. Maybe Mitsukake is the same — reliving his last encounter with Shouka, when in fact it was only us.”

He sighed heavily.

“All the signals I’m getting from Tasuki’s body suggest that this isn’t just a fever picked up by cold nights or too much travelling. It’s something else — something dark taking root inside of him.”

“Byouma?” Hotohori whispered the word, and Anzu frowned, glancing between the two Seishi as she struggled to understand the unspoken message between the two. At length, Chichiri nodded.

“That’s what I fear.” He said heavily. “Which is why, Anzu, Aidou-san — you *must not* touch him. Not even a little bit. If I’m right about this, then you could both be at great risk if you did, you know? Tasuki’s strong, and he may be able to fight it off. You two — I don’t think I’d like to risk it. In fact, you’d be better off not being near him. This disease saps strength and spirit, and there’s no sense in causing more danger than we have to.”

“I want to stay with him.” Anzu shook her head. “Please, Chichiri. I promise not to touch him — but I can’t… I can’t just go outside.”

“Anzu…” Chichiri sighed, then he shrugged. “You give me your word?”

“I swear.” Anzu nodded solemnly. “I promise not to touch him. Not even a little bit.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Tasuki objected, his tones unusually belligerent, even for him and Chichiri sighed, raising his fingers as he focused his energy into a stronger spell.

“I’ve put a barrier around your body, Tasuki-kun.” He said softly. “But I can’t do anything more to help you unless you fight it too. Try to stay calm, and focus your energy, okay?”

He glanced across to Hotohori.

“Will you take Aidou-san outside, and explain to her about the

byouma?" He asked quietly, and the Emperor started, then nodded his head.

"With pleasure." He agreed, glancing at the troubled face of Tasuki's older sister. "As far as I can. But Chichiri — if you need my strength, I will offer it gladly. Just let me know, and I will come."

"I might need to take you up on it, depending on how this goes." Chichiri smiled grimly. "Thank you, Heika. I'll keep it in mind."

Hotohori inclined his head slightly, then held out a hand to Aidou, who cast her brother a faltering glance, but allowed herself to be guided from the room.

"Is this… serious?" Anzu asked in a hesitant voice. "I mean, Chichiri, is it… really so dangerous as that?"

"It could be." Chichiri agreed. "Tasuki is strong, and if anyone can fight it, I believe it's him. But we've had a trying, busy few days, and he needs to rest."

He stood, eying her doubtfully.

"I'm not sure about leaving you here alone with him, even with the barrier." He admitted. "But someone should get some water, to help cool him down. Maybe you should…"

"Don't make me leave here." Anzu begged, shaking her head. "I swear not to go near him, I *swear*… Chichiri, please!"

Chichiri sighed, taking in the earnest look on her young face, and at length he nodded.

"It's against my better judgement, you know?" He admitted tiredly. "But considering everything… maybe… you are the right one to be here. At least… you're fond of Tasuki, and you aren't tainted the way we are with past knowledge of this thing. I think he needs that, at the moment. Just don't break your promise, all right? You mustn't touch him, no matter what he says or does, or what happens. It's dangerous. And if he changes — if anything changes, no matter how small — call for me. All right?"

"I promise." Anzu repeated solemnly, and the monk cast her another hesitant, troubled look. Then he sighed, leaving the room, the door swinging shut behind him.

For a moment, there was silence in the small chamber. Then Anzu bit her lip, casting her companion a sidelong glance.

"How do you feel, Genrou?" She asked softly. Tasuki snorted.

“Are you going to be a girl and fuss over me like a mother hen?” He demanded. “I’m all right now. I’m stronger than that… I’m fine. Chichiri’s overreacting — he’s prone to that, sometimes. It’s all right. It’s just been a long day so far.”

“For all of us.” Anzu sighed, leaning up against the wall of the room as she considered. “Your friend in Choukou — do you think you’ll be able to help him, somehow?”

“Ask Chichiri. He’s the sorcerer.” Tasuki said bad-temperedly. “If you’re just going to sit there and bother me with questions, you could at least leave me alone.”

“I’d rather stay here.”

“Why? I don’t need you.”

“Because I want to. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“I wish you’d go back to the damn mountain.” Tasuki said flatly. “Get Chichiri to take you there. You and Aidou both. You’re in the way. You’re not Shichi Seishi, and this is none of your business. Besides, all girls do is cause trouble and cry and think they know a better way. It’s annoying. You should go back.”

“Genrou…” Anzu stared at him, hurt by this brutal assessment. “I told you, I’m not going back to Reikaku-zan until you do. I don’t want to stay with Kouji. I want to be here with you.”

“Well, I told you, I don’t want you, okay?” Tasuki retorted. “Will you listen? Why do girls never listen?”

“Maybe because men are too stupid to know what they’re talking about.” Anzu snapped. “Besides, I’m not going back. Not if you don’t come with me. I’m not going to be some prize that half of your men decide they can have for the taking now that Kashira isn’t around.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your bandits. Some of them… you’d think they didn’t know women aren’t just there for them to play with.” Anzu said bitterly, turning her face away from him as tears glittered on her lashes. “It’s like Aidou says — you just don’t get it. You don’t understand that women have feelings — we’re not just toys.”

“Hell, now you’re listening to Aidou?” Tasuki demanded. “Will you just get out and damn well leave me alone, Anzu? I’m tired and you’re whining. I don’t know what you mean, I don’t care what you mean. Girls are always so complicated and it’s always about them and their problems. I don’t care about that, all right? I care about finding the

others and about getting back to my life on Reikaku-zan. I didn't ask for you to drop in on me and I didn't invite you along on this trip. Stop yapping and listen, will you? I don't want you here. Go away."

"So it's all right then, is it, for me to stay on Reikaku-zan and be raped by some drunken bandit who doesn't know any better?" Anzu demanded angrily. "Is that the kind of Kashira you are, Genrou — do you really think that's all right, for a man to just take a woman because he wants to, and not even care about her feelings?"

"Anzu, you're getting hysterical." Tasuki sighed, rubbing his temples. "You're giving me a headache — leave it out already, huh? If you don't like Reikaku-zan, you don't have to be there. Like I said, noone invited you!"

"If it wasn't for Chichiri's barrier, I'd slap you." Anzu's voice shook. "You can't seriously mean that you hate women enough for that? Hotohori-sama… Hotohori-sama took his sword to a man because he tried to hurt me, even though he didn't know who I was or anything about me. He defended me, with real honour. But all you can say, Kashira of Reikaku-zan, is that if I don't like it, don't go there?"

Tasuki glared at her for a moment, then he shook his head.

"You have no idea what kind of a man I am. What I'm capable of." He said thickly, and with a start Anzu noticed the odd brilliance of fever glimmering in the depths of his bronzeish eyes. "Bandits take what they want — it's how life is when you choose to live that way. That's why it's no place for women… that's why you shouldn't have come to Reikaku-zan. Because that's the way that it is."

"I don't believe you." Anzu shot back. "I don't believe you think that way! You're just trying to get me to go — you're just trying to push me away because you're still obsessed with Suzaku no Miko and you can't get her out of your head!"

As soon as she'd said the words, she regretted them, for a haunted look came over Tasuki's expression, and had it not been for his rising fever, his face would have drained of all colour.

"Hell, what has this to do with Miaka? Miaka isn't even here!"

"The fact that you hate women, but you don't hate the Miko." Anzu's voice shook, knowing she was pushing things too far but somehow unable to stop the feelings as they flooded out. "You loved her, didn't you? You were in love with Suzaku no Miko and that's why you treat all other women like dirt. Well, I don't think there's anything so special about her! So she came from another world — big

deal! I don't think she's so much better than any other woman is!"

"Anzu, dammit, shut up." Tasuki snapped, but Anzu shook her head.

"I'm not going to shut up." She said tearfully. "All I've done since I came to Reikaku-zan was to try and help you. I thought we were friends, at the very least. My sister died and I had noone to turn to, but I felt sure that I could come to you."

"I'm not your nursemaid! It sucks that Karin died but it's nothing to do with me!"

"You always said you hated girls, but you lied, because you love Miaka-sama and you pretend that you don't!" Anzu shot across him. "I bet even now if you could go to her damn world somehow you would, wouldn't you? You'd go… you'd run after her. I bet you didn't stop her being at Reikaku-zan. I bet you didn't mind travelling with her as a companion. You're a hypocrite, Genrou, and you're lying even to yourself. I can't stand it any more — it's driving me crazy!"

"Do you really think you understand anything about Miaka? Why I'd give my life for her, if ever I had to?" Tasuki demanded, and Anzu bit her lip, seeing that the lines of pain had increased across her companion's brow. "You don't know anything. And if you're so against men who push themselves on women, you're the hypocrite. You should do as I tell you and get lost. I'm a bandit, just as they are. Miaka… I'm no different from the men you want to leave behind, so don't think that I am. I'm a man, I'll take what I want. That's what it is, being a bandit. Do you still think you're better off with me? Go away, Anzu. Leave me alone. You don't get it. And I hate women because of conversations like this."

Anzu's eyes widened, as cold horror stabbed through her soul. She whitened, slowly shaking her head.

"You… Miaka-sama… you didn't?" She breathed, disbelief in her eyes. "You're lying to me! You didn't! Genrou, tell me you didn't!"

"Why, is the truth too big for you to handle?" Tasuki snapped back at her. "Face facts. I tried to rape Suzaku no Miko, and I would've succeeded, if I hadn't been interrupted. I woulda killed anyone who crossed my path that night, Anzu, and I damn near did. I broke the ribs of one of my best friends, and I did my best to violate his woman, too. Still want to hang around with bandits? Grow up. Get a clue and leave me alone. I'm fed up with your… *ah*!"

He trailed off, doubling up as he clutched his hands to his chest, his

brow creasing in pain as he struggled to draw breath into his lungs. Fear leapt into Anzu's expression and she jumped to her feet, only just remembering her promise to Chichiri not to touch him.

"Genrou?" She whispered. "Genrou, are you… all right?"

The bandit did not reply, drawing in pained gasps of air and Anzu saw to her alarm that he was perspiring heavily, even in the coolness of the small sleeping chamber. She bit her lip, tears streaming down her cheeks as she berated herself for not realising it sooner.

"Genrou, no… no! You can't get worse… you have to fight this!" She murmured. "Genrou? *Genrou*!"

As her companion slumped back against the wooden floor, pain lines still drawn across his brow as the fever seemed to take hold of him anew.

"Chichiri!" Anzu shrieked. "*Chichiri*!"

The door swung open immediately to reveal the monk, and he did not have to ask her what was wrong. He was down at Tasuki's side in a moment, putting a hand on his friend's brow. He bit his lip.

"What happened?" He asked softly, as Anzu's tears threatened to overwhelm her. "Anzu, stop crying, please, and tell me what happened."

"It's my fault!" Half hysterical, Anzu flung herself on the startled monk, burying her head in his shoulder as she shook with the force of her sobs. "I'm sorry, Chichiri. I'm sorry!"

"Just tell me what happened?" Gently Chichiri disentangled himself, holding her at arm's length. "What do you mean, it's your fault?"

"You s… said that this wasn't like normal illness. That it sapped his spirit." Anzu said unsteadily. "But I… I was upset, and he said things, and… and I shouted at him. And he… he shouted back and now he's like this and… and I'm sorry, Chichiri. I'm a terrible nurse — I didn't mean to make him sicker!"

Chichiri frowned, brushing his fingers against Tasuki's brow once more.

"His temperature has gone up." He reflected with a sigh. "Tasuki? Tasuki-kun — can you hear me? Open your eyes."

There was no response, as Tasuki sank deep into a fever driven, restless unconsciousness, and Anzu swallowed hard, terror in her dark

eyes.

“Is he going to die?” She whispered. Chichiri frowned, shaking his head.

“I don’t know.” He admitted. “I don’t know enough about byouma to tell you that. I only know the things I do from travelling with Mitsukake and hearing his accounts. And considering that Tasuki got sick after the trip to Choukou, I’m certain that his encounter with Mitsukake there *must* be the root cause of this. But… more than that…”

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“You didn’t touch him, did you?”

“No.” Anzu shook her head. “You said not to. But… but…”

“Will you tell me what you said to him? And what he said to you?”

“I…” Anzu flushed uncomfortably, looking down. “I accused him of being in love with Miaka-sama. And he said… he said something horrible about it. Something… something I couldn’t believe, but…”

She faltered.

“He wasn’t at all like himself.” She whispered. “He was angry and bitter and… and that isn’t Genrou. It isn’t! Sure, he can shout, and yell, and he’s tactless and insensitive… but this was different. It was like… like he really hated me and he didn’t care how much he hurt me. Maybe it was because… because I was hurting him, too.”

Chichiri’s expression darkened, and he shook his head.

“Byouma feeds off negativity.” He said sadly. “It’s not like other illnesses — it has a demon’s power at it’s root. It infiltrates the person’s doubts and regrets, and turns them into much bigger weaknesses. It’s how the disease takes control of someone’s body — by breaking down their spirit and their will and driving them deeper and deeper into darkness. That’s why he was acting that way. It’s not Tasuki’s true self, not really. It’s the influence of the demon inside of him — feeding off his uncertainty and using it as a weapon to drive him further away from people who care about him.”

“Genrou…” Anzu’s voice caught in her throat.

“As a rule, Tasuki would be a bad choice for a disease like this to infect.” Chichiri sat back, regarding the patient pensively as he reached for a discarded blanket, pulling it over his friend’s body. “He’s not given to doubts or regrets by nature. But things aren’t as they

usually are at the moment. Things have happened — there's a general layer of negative energy in the atmosphere. An instability — something that makes it easier to make big deals out of little things. I imagine it affects everyone to some degree… but I think perhaps it affects Shichi Seishi more — because we're more in tune with this world's spiritual atmosphere."

"Even you?"

"As a sorcerer, I can sense it and guard against it, although it takes some of my strength and it's a pain to have to do." Chichiri said ruefully. "More or less. Tasuki's guileless though, you know? He's unprepared for it."

"And that's why the byouma's made him sick?"

"I don't know." Chichiri sighed. "The fire in his village, his father's injury… I suppose they've unsettled him too. And whatever you said to him — about Miaka — it wasn't wise, you know. Not right now… though I imagine you couldn't help it."

Anzu buried her head in her hands.

"He said he tried to rape her." She said unsteadily. "Like it was no big deal — like he wanted to tell me to hurt me. Chichiri, when I was at the mountain, one of the bandits… tried to rape me. Kouji stopped it, but that's why I decided to come after you. Because I wanted to be able to protect myself, and I knew that Genrou… that he wouldn't ever…"

She sighed.

"Then he said something like that." She added. "And… I… I don't understand. I don't understand!"

"I thought that might have been it. The final blow, as it were." Chichiri got to his feet, resting his hand on Anzu's shoulder. "Listen. I want you to go outside, and stay with Aidou. Understand? You're upset and that's not going to help him any."

"But… but…"

"I'm going to strengthen the barrier, if I can." Chichiri said evenly. "Can you ask Hotohori-sama to come join me, please? I think I'll need his help, and he has done this before. Now he has some physical form, I'm hoping his contribution might be stronger even than the last time."

Anzu bit her lip.

“So it is true.” She whispered. “Chichiri… I know you. You don’t cause conflict or confrontation if you can avoid it… but… but… if what Genrou said hadn’t been true… you would have said so right away.”

“Anzu.” Chichiri sighed, casting Tasuki a glance. Then he nodded. “Yes… in a manner of speaking, I suppose it is true. But I wasn’t going to bring it up.”

At this, Anzu’s face drained of all colour, and she shook her head.

“I don’t believe it.” She murmured. “I won’t believe it! Genrou… he isn’t… he isn’t that kind of man! He wouldn’t do that! *He just wouldn’t*!”

Almost as if he’d heard her, Tasuki let out an incoherent murmur, and Chichiri frowned.

“I wonder if he knows what we’re saying.” He mused. “Anzu-chan, you have to stop this. Crying like that in here… if he can hear you, he might be further affected. You need to go outside… please.”

“Not until you tell me what happened.” Anzu grabbed the monk by the hand, shaking her head obstinately. “I don’t care how awful it is. I won’t go until I know.”

Chichiri sighed, but sank back to the floor, crossing his legs as he nodded his head.

“All right.” He said resignedly. “Although I’m sort of breaking an unspoken promise by doing so, you know. It’s not something we discuss. It happened… it’s in the past. It was better for everyone that we moved on. Tasuki especially.”

“But Chichiri!” Anzu’s eyes widened. “He tried to… and you… you were all okay with this?”

“You’re jumping to conclusions.” Chichiri said evenly. “I thought you loved Tasuki — do you doubt in your feelings so much?”

“No, but… when he says… when… Chichiri, what are you trying to do?” Anzu demanded. “Just tell me! Tell me the truth!”

“So you can justify loving him?” Chichiri raised an eyebrow. Anzu shook her head.

“Because I won’t believe it unless you do.” She whispered. “Because I have… I have faith in the kind of man Genrou is. I… I thought I knew that, at least. Kouji said… he would never tolerate someone treating a woman that way — any woman. And… and I believe that.

So… please. Make me understand. There must be something… make me understand!”

Chichiri’s expression softened at this, and he nodded his head.

“Tasuki did… there was… an attempt to assault Miaka. He plied her with alcohol, and sought to seduce her against her will.” He said softly. “When Tamahome tried to intervene, there was a fight of some sorts, and Tamahome’s ribs were broken in the struggle. It was… ugly. For all concerned.”

“But why?” Tears still poured down Anzu’s face. “*Why* would he do such a thing? Even if he loved Miaka-sama — no, *especially* if he loved her — he wouldn’t hurt her… would he?”

Chichiri pursed his lips.

“It’s true that he doesn’t really understand women, or how they think or feel. Not very well.” He admitted. “But… you’re right. Tasuki would never do something like that of his own volition. At least, that’s my belief. It’s Miaka’s, too. And Tamahome’s. Tasuki was being manipulated by a demon’s power at the time. A demon born and controlled by one who you know well — the being known as Tenkou.”

“Tenkou.” Anzu echoed the name, clenching her fists at the sound of it. “Hasn’t he caused enough suffering?”

“He won’t cause any more.” Chichiri said lightly. “And I can’t comment on Tasuki’s own feelings… he’s the only one who really knows. But I don’t believe he would have assaulted Miaka on his own.”

He frowned, looking troubled.

“The problem is, Tasuki doesn’t know for sure whether it was his doing, or the demon’s. He’s said as much.” He added. “Which is why it’s not something we discuss. Tamahome and Miaka, they feel about it the way I do. In the end, you see, *Tasuki* was the one who broke the spell. Instead of betraying those he cared about, he turned his tessen on himself and tried to end his life — that was the moment Mitsukake saved him, and probably part of the reason he feels so strongly about going back to Choukou. I think… if he has any doubts, or anything which a byouma could take root in, this would probably be the biggest one. Until then… he’d never had cause to doubt his own honour or integrity. Betrayal is an unforgivable thing to him, you know. It was like he’d crossed a line he couldn’t go back from.”

“Genrou…” Anzu whispered, horror flickering in her eyes. “That’s what he was talking to Kouji about, the first night you and he came

back. I heard a bit of it, from Reirei's grave… they didn't know I was there, and I… I suppose I eavesdropped on what was being said. He sounded… serious. It was then I heard him say… about Miaka… that he didn't know whether he loved her. But I didn't think… oh, poor Genrou! And I yelled at him! How could I have yelled at him?"

"Will you go find Hotohori for me, now?" Chichiri asked gently. "Between us, we might be able to try and confine the demon a little. At least until Tasuki has had a chance to fight it himself. Without his help, we probably can't drive it out. But if we can lend him our strength and prevent it from overtaking him completely, we'll do that."

"All… all right." Anzu got unsteadily to her feet. "I… I'll go now. But if he dies, Chichiri — if he dies now, I'll never forgive myself."

She shivered involuntarily as she glanced down at the fevered bandit, a haunted look entering her gaze.

"*Never*."

Chapter 17

Chapter Sixteen

"Anzu?"

As Anzu stumbled out into the darkening world outside, tears still glittering on her lashes, she heard the voice of the bandit's older sister calling her name and she turned, seeing the look of apprehension on Aidou's sharp features. She swallowed hard, biting her lip, and Aidou's breath caught in her throat as she registered what the girl's demeanour meant.

"He's worse, isn't he?" She asked softly. Anzu nodded.

"He was so… not like himself." She choked. "Aidou-san, I'm sorry… I'm sure I made him worse. But he was so… so strange. And Chichiri… Chichiri doesn't know if he's going to die or not. He sent me out here, but I… I can't bear it!"

Aidou bit her lip, then, without a word, she slipped an arm around the younger girl, hugging her tightly. As she did so, Anzu felt the tension in the older woman's body, and knew that despite her apparent composure, Aidou's heart was as wrenched as her own. She gazed up, meeting Aidou's eyes with sad ones of her own.

"I'm sorry. This must hurt you too." She realised. "And I'm acting like I'm the only one who's affected."

"No… you're acting like someone who's afraid to lose a man she loves." Aidou sighed, shaking her head slowly. "I don't understand why you love my brother, Anzu — but I know that you do. And I know… it's painful. Losing someone you care about. Whoever that someone is."

Anzu was silent for a moment. Then she nodded.

"I suppose you do." She agreed softly. "I'm sorry."

Aidou's eyes narrowed, and she gazed at her companion suspiciously.

"What do you mean, you suppose I do?" She asked quietly. "What do you know?"

Anzu flushed, looking embarrassed.

“Your mother told me… about… about the man who died in the war.” She admitted. “I didn’t mean to…”

“Did you tell Shun’u about that?”

“No. And I wasn’t going to mention it to you, either.” Anzu swallowed hard. “I’m really sorry, Aidou-san. I didn’t mean to stir it up for you, especially now. But my mind is all over the place. I don’t… I’m not thinking straight. I just… can’t process this. I already lost Karin — and I can’t lose Genrou too!”

Aidou was silent for a moment, and with a jolt, Anzu registered the tears that rolled silently down the older woman’s cheeks. She opened her mouth to speak, but Aidou shook her head, putting a finger to her young companion’s lips.

“I didn’t cry, when the news came back from the front.” She said softly. “I was angry. Furious with him for abandoning me like he did. I suppose I didn’t forgive him for it, really. That I’d believed in him, and he’d let me down. But… I don’t think you feel that way, do you? With Shun’u. You… you’re not angry with him, even though he was so stupid, darting after his friend like that when Chichiri-san warned him not to. You make me ashamed of myself… because even now, I’m angry with Shun’u for being a fool.”

“I…” Anzu faltered, swallowing hard. “I don’t know. All I… all I know is that I love him so much, Aidou-san. I knew I cared about him, but now, when Chichiri said he might… not live… I couldn’t bear it. I can’t… I can’t bear the idea that he might not be there any more. Even if he shouts at me, or is tactless, or even if he doesn’t love me. He… I… I love him and I want him to be all right.”

Aidou frowned. Then,

“Hotohori-sama said that byouma acted on positive and negative emotion.” She said slowly. “And that it’s Shun’u’s doubts and uncertainties that are allowing it to take hold of him so strongly.”

Anzu nodded her head miserably.

“Yes.” She admitted. “Chichiri said that, too.”

“How much do you believe in him, Anzu-chan?” Aidou asked softly. Anzu stared up at the older woman, confusion in her gaze.

“I don’t understand?”

“You love him in a way I didn’t even know anyone could.” Aidou admitted, and a faint smile touched her lips. “My stupid, impulsive brother — but you love him more than anything. I can tell that, now. I

wasn't sure, at first — but now I know that you do. Maybe… maybe he needs that, now. Do you think so? If you… if you're sure how you feel… maybe you can help him."

Anzu stared at her companion as if seeing her for the first time, as realisation shot through her. She disentangled herself from the older woman's embrace, turning back towards the house as she hurried to the little sickroom within which she knew Tasuki was fighting for his life.

"Anzu! Anzu, get *back* here!"

Chichiri's cries fell on deaf ears, as the young circus performer pushed past the monk and into the small chamber proper. As her gaze fell on the patient, her heart clenched in her throat and she swallowed hard, her heart aching to see him in so much distress. His jacket and shirt had been removed in an attempt to prevent them becoming soaked, for sweat still beaded his body, running off his skin as he tossed and turned at intervals against the coarse blanket that had become his makeshift sickbed. Chichiri's *kesa* had been folded into a pillow, as if somehow, by using something so charmed, the monk could ward against the demon entering Tasuki's thoughts any deeper. As she watched, almost in a daze, Chichiri placed a cool, damp cloth against the bandit's brow, his action gentle and careful but Anzu was aware enough to note the faint tremble of his hands as he tended to one who had become like a brother as well as a friend. Tasuki did not flinch against the sudden touch of cold water, his skin an odd, waxy hue as he lay still deep in the unconscious state he had fallen into during their fight. He seemed entirely unaware that anyone else was even in the room, and it did not need either of the guarding Seishi to tell her that he was weakening. She bit her lip, a fleeting memory of her dying sister crossing her thoughts, as she remembered nursing Karin through several fevers in vain.

"But I'm not going to let *you* die, Genrou." She whispered, not even realising that she had begun to cry again until her tears began to fall onto the restless, fevered body of the young bandit. She had never seen him so weak before, and the very notion that he could be frightened her so much that for an instant she was almost stifled by the sensation. Then she gathered her wits, remembering what Chichiri had said about the nature of the disease.

"Anzu, you can't… come away from him." Chichiri was at her side, but she shook her head, resolution in her gaze.

"I won't. I *won't*!" She said firmly. "I'm not going to sit outside when Genrou needs help!"

“Chichiri is right, Anzu.” Hotohori said gravely, and as she glanced at the former Emperor, she was suddenly aware of the toll maintaining Chichiri’s barrier was having on his half-formed body. She flitted her gaze across to Chichiri, alarm flickering in her heart as she saw the same uncharacteristic tiredness in the monk’s dark red gaze, and inwardly she gathered the shards of her courage, making up her mind.

“I’m not leaving him.” She said softly. “I’ve decided. You can’t change my mind. I’m not going to go outside… not this time. I’m staying here. Here with Genrou. That’s why I came to Kounan… to be with Genrou. And this is where I want to be.”

“Anzu, it’s dangerous, you know?” Chichiri said gently, as he removed the now-warm cloth from Tasuki’s brow. “It’s taking a lot of both mine and Hotohori-sama’s strength just to keep the byouma under any kind of control. As it is, we can’t drive it out of him without his help — if it was to infect you, there’d be nothing we could do. Tasuki’s Suzaku power makes him strong, and I can guard against it with my barriers. Hotohori-sama’s body is not like ours, so he’s probably not susceptible to the disease. But you… I don’t want you to get hurt. He wouldn’t want it either… you know that.”

Anzu frowned, then shook her head.

“Genrou is going to *live*.” She said firmly, and before the monk could stop her, she had reached down to grab the bandit’s hot, sticky hand in hers, squeezing the fingers tightly as she hardened her resolve. “And I’m going to stay with him until he’s better. I’ve decided, Chichiri. Whatever happens to me… this is where I’m going to be.”

“Anzu…” Horror flickered into Chichiri’s weary gaze, but Anzu merely tightened her grip, meeting the monk’s look of dismay with a sad smile of her own.

“You told me, when we were on Reikaku-zan, that I had to be sure of my own feelings before I tried to make anyone else aware of them.” She said quietly. “And you were right. I had doubts then — doubts I kept coming back to, again and again. This evening, I… I aired those doubts, and I made matters worse. I hurt him, even knowing he was weak — it was selfish of me. And when I went outside — when you sent me away, I realised it for the first time. That it doesn’t matter how Genrou feels about me. It’s how *I* feel about *him*, that’s all I can focus my energy on right now. And when I did that, I knew that if he died, it would… it would hurt more than anything ever could. Because I love him, and I don’t have doubts any more. Not about anything. I

love him and if that means I get sick too, then it does. I'm going to stay here, anyway… because I have faith in Genrou, and this is where I need to be."

"Anzu." Hotohori's eyes became wide with surprise at this. "You realise what it might mean? This is no gentle disease… and Chichiri is right. You are not as strong as Tasuki is."

"I don't care." Anzu said firmly. "Besides, I'm here now. I've broken through the barrier and I've touched his hand. If the demon is going to spread into me, it probably already has."

She smiled grimly.

"And it'll find it's met it's match, too." She said resolutely. "Because you said, Chichiri, that this disease fed on negativity and doubt. And if I don't have any doubt, it can't hurt me. Can it? So I'm not scared to face it down. Just because I'm not a warrior of Suzaku doesn't mean I'm useless, you know. You said that those negative things were what dragged him down. His doubts about Miaka-sama and what happened to her — because Genrou's a good, honest man, even as a bandit, and he doesn't like feeling like a villain. Well, I want to make him see that he's not a villain. And that even knowing what happened when he was with Miaka-sama, I still love him with all my heart. If he has doubts, then I'll be strong enough for both of us. I might not have magic like you do — but that doesn't mean I can't fight and it doesn't mean I won't fight — not when it's Genrou's life that's at stake."

Chichiri stared at her for a moment. Then, very slightly, he smiled. He slowly inclined his head, bowing towards her as if accepting her stance, and Anzu felt a flash of relief wash over her.

"If that's how you feel, then I won't try and interfere." He said quietly. "If you're really sure you have no doubt in your heart… or fear, or hesitation. Maybe you can reach him — I don't know. But it's worth a try, anyway. Without his help, we can't beat this. We need him to fight it from within… but confining this thing is tricky, and I can't get him to rouse up. His chi is weakening — he's losing the battle. He needs as much help as he can get… and maybe you're the one to provide it."

Anzu nodded, taking the bandit's other hand in hers and squeezing it tightly between her fingers.

"I understand." She whispered, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks as she gazed down at the man she had travelled so far to find. "Genrou, you oaf, listen to me. I didn't come all the way here from Sairou just so that I could bury you too, you know. You're stronger

than this and we both know it. You don't have doubts — not in people, not in anything. And you have a lot of friends who love you. You're being silly and you need to snap out of it. Stop letting your nightmares rule your mind. The demon wants you to think bad thoughts. It wants you to hurt — but you've got nothing to feel bad about. You've done nothing wrong… and we need you. All of us. We need you."

There was no response, and Anzu bit her lip, gently bending to kiss him on the forehead.

"And I love you." She whispered, not caring any longer who was watching and whether or not he heard her voice. "I love you, you great, stupid ape. I won't let you die on me. If it means I have to give you all of my strength to fight this too, then dammit, that's what I'll do. I won't see someone else I love die in front of me — I won't be helpless this time. Between us we can beat this demon, Genrou. I believe it. I believe we can! And you must… you must believe it too. Open your eyes, and help Chichiri and Hotohori-sama to save your life! Otherwise I'll be real mad at you, and so will Kouji and everyone back at the mountain. They'd have a lot to say about a bandit leader who lost a battle with a demon, considering the reputation you have — you're not going to let this beat you, are you?"

For a moment, nothing in the small room moved. Then, as Anzu began to fear the stillness as some kind of ill omen, there was a faint murmur from the patient and a flicker of an eyelid that brought a surge of hope flaring through her heart. She gripped his fingers more tightly, hardly daring to believe that he might have heard her, and that from somewhere deep within Tasuki's consciousness, he was fighting to get out.

"I know you can hear me." She said gently, setting one of his hands down as she lovingly brushed sweat-damp strands of hair out of his face. "And if you're mad at me for saying all of this, I don't care. I don't care about anything except you getting better, that's all. If you hate me, well, it won't stop me loving you. And if you're angry, then you are. But I'll still be happy, so long as you're alive. Because that's what matters most to me right now, Genrou. Your life. Your being in this world. That's all."

At this the bronzeish eyes fluttered open, disorientated and confused as the bandit struggled to bring his surroundings into focus. Hotohori let out an exclamation of surprise, gazing at Chichiri in disbelief, and the monk spread his hands, shrugging his shoulders.

"The power of love." He said quietly. "Haven't we seen it before

enough times to know that sometimes, there's nothing quite as strong as someone's true feelings?"

"Genrou." Anzu resisted the urge to hug him, instead resting her finger against his cheek as he gazed up at her uncomprehendingly. "Don't look at me like that, as if you don't know who I am. You need to get a grip on yourself, okay? I'm going to stay with you — I'm going to fight right alongside you, I promise. And Chichiri and Hotohori-sama, they are too. But you have to fight this demon from within, too. Show it that you really are a wolf inside of there — that you don't give in so easily. Okay? You need to battle as hard as you can… if you can do that, we'll drive it out and you'll be okay. I have faith… if you can find the strength, it'll all be okay."

"Anzu?" Tasuki's voice was barely more than a faltering croak, then, "Dammit, are you tryin' to break my fingers, girl?"

"Yes, if it will keep you awake and focused." Anzu said determinedly. "You keep saying you're a man — you're a bandit — whatever. Now it's time you prove it."

"Anzu's right, Tasuki." Chichiri knelt at the bandit's other side. "Listen. You know that there's a byouma lurking inside of you — a demon fever that's hard to shake off. There's only one way I can think of that we can get rid of it, and it's going to hurt… it will probably hurt a lot. We don't have a healer, just your strength and endurance, and whatever Hotohori-sama and I can do to help you. Do you think you're up to it? I don't think we should wait any longer. If you can bear it, we need to fight it now."

"Byouma?" Tasuki wetted his lips, then determination flickered in his gaze, and in her heart, Anzu felt that now things would truly be all right. Chichiri nodded.

"Like… the thing… that killed… Shouka?"

"Yes."

"Shit." Tasuki grimaced weakly, then, "I'll kill Mitsukake when I see him next."

"He's already dead, you know." Chichiri told him absently. "Stop sidetracking and focus, will you? This thing feeds on your negative emotions — wanting to kill your friend isn't exactly a good step in the right direction. We need you to fight against those things — fight them as hard as you can. Can you manage that?"

"Who are you talkin' to, Chichiri? Of course I can." Tasuki's voice sounded a little stronger, and Chichiri smiled, although Anzu could

still see the anxiety in his expression.

“Right.” He said quietly. “Then brace yourself. And Anzu?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let go of his hand.” Chichiri instructed. “I think… he needs your strength now too, as well. As much of it as you can give him — do you understand what I’m asking you to do?”

Anzu nodded her head firmly.

“I understand.” She said frankly. “And I won’t let go.”

“Then let’s see if we can’t exorcise this demon once and for all.” Chichiri said grimly. “Hotohori-sama, are you prepared?”

“I’ll do what I have to, Chichiri. You know that.” Hotohori nodded. “Ready when you are.”

“Tasuki, you too.” Chichiri instructed, bringing his fingers up before his face as he tensed his entire body, summoning his spiritual magic to the forefront as he prepared his spell. “We’re as reliant on you as each other to do this — don’t let me down, all right? Remember, Tamahome beat his demons… now it’s your turn.”

“Just do it, dammit.” Tasuki said hoarsely. “Before this idiot breaks my fingers right off!”

Chichiri nodded, closing his eyes as he cast his spell, and as a flare of red energy engulfed his body, Tasuki let out a yell of agony, his entire body going rigid as Chichiri’s pure magic clashed with the taint of the byouma’s curse. Anzu’s heart constricted again and she gripped his fingers tightly, wishing with all her heart and soul that any of her strength could be transferred to him, in order to bring him safely through.

“I have faith in you.” She whispered, the tears continuing to fall. “So have faith in yourself, Genrou… and don’t you dare leave me!”

Tasuki’s brow creased, his eyes screwed up in concentration as his breath came in ragged, resolute gasps and Anzu could tell, even as another shudder of pain wracked through him, that he was fighting tooth and nail to regain control of his body. As Chichiri redoubled his efforts, a strange glow emanated from around the area of Tasuki’s heart, and as the bandit let out a gasp, something began to spill through the surface of his skin, glittering and glowing eerily as it sought to gain some kind of form in the world outside it’s host body.

“Anzu, get back! Let go of Tasuki — get back!” Chichiri yelled.

“That’s the byouma — don’t let it touch you!”

“I told you already. It can’t hurt me!” Anzu replied stubbornly. “I’m not letting go of him — *I’m not letting go*!”

Tasuki opened his eyes, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he registered the spectral form that arched above him on the makeshift bed, and as it lunged towards Anzu’s body, he cursed, shifting his hand slightly towards his jacket and the silver fan that lay on top of it.

“The tessen.” He rasped out. “Give… me… the damn… tessen!”

“Tasuki?” Chichiri looked startled, and Tasuki’s expression became one of urgency.

“Now, dammit! Before it… goes into… her!” He exclaimed, and comprehension flooded Chichiri’s face, as the monk grabbed up the weapon, passing it into the bandit’s sweaty grip.

“Anzu, get down!” Hotohori exclaimed, and Anzu ducked, just in time to miss the sweep of the ghostly byouma as it sought to infiltrate her young form. At this, Tasuki seemed to gain a flicker of new strength, and he narrowed his eyes, focusing his energy on raising the heavy silver weapon.

“You get the hell away from us both, you stinkin’ demon!” He spat out. “*R… R… Rekka Shin’en*!”

Despite the exhaustion in his tones, a blast of flame shot out from the end of the tessen, engulfing the demon in it’s blaze as it did so. As ash rained down onto the makeshift sickbed, Tasuki’s grip on his weapon loosened, and it fell to the floor with a clatter as he closed his eyes, letting out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Genrou?” Anzu murmured, half-afraid to touch him, in the aftermath of the demon’s destruction. “Genrou, are you… are you all right?”

“It’s gone.” Chichiri held out his hands, then nodded, a faint smile touching his lips. “We did it, you know? We drove it out. Thanks to Tasuki’s flames — it’s over.”

“Genrou!” This was enough to break through Anzu’s resolute composure and she flung herself on the startled bandit, crying bitterly as she held him close to her body. “Oh, thank God… thank God!”

“Are you deranged? Anzu, get off me!” Tasuki protested, but Anzu took no notice.

“I was so scared I was going to lose you.” She whispered. “Don’t do

that to me again — not ever, you understand? Even if you do hate me… even if you are in love with Miaka and you never care about me — don't scare me so much again, all right? You can't die. Of all people in this world, Genrou — promise me you won't die."

"You're friggin' crazy! Get the hell off me — do you want to suffocate me yourself?"

"I think he's feeling better already." Hotohori observed dryly, lowering his sword, and Chichiri nodded his head.

"I think so." He agreed, relief clear on his face. "Thankfully."

"Shun'u is… all right?"

An uncertain voice came from the doorway, and Anzu glanced up, seeing Tasuki's sister standing there watching them. There were tears on her cheeks too, and Chichiri got to his feet, nodding his head.

"I think so." He agreed with a smile. "It's all right, Aidou-san. You can come in. The demon's been driven out — It should be safe."

Aidou slipped cautiously into the room, coming to kneel beside her brother's bed. Tasuki eyed her warily, but Aidou offered him a faint smile.

"You're an idiot." She said categorically. "But since you're going to live, I'll spare you the scolding. This time. Just remember next time you do something stupid and rash — I've got to explain to Ma and Pa what you went and did to yourself. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm all right. Geez." Tasuki rolled his eyes. "What is with you two, anyway? Tears and acting weird and all? You're creeping me out, the both of you — is this a woman thing I don't get, or what?"

"*I* might hit you, at this rate." Anzu threatened, but inwardly she knew she would not. The more like himself the bandit sounded, the more she knew that he would truly be all right, and despite herself, she could not be annoyed by anything he said. Meeting Aidou's gaze across the bed, she realised that Tasuki's sister was feeling the same way, and she offered the older woman a conspiratorial smile. Aidou reacted with a startled one of her own, which became more sincere as she understood the unspoken message between them. For the first time, Anzu felt that she and Aidou truly shared a bond.

"We both care what happens to him, even if we do it in different ways." She reflected. "Genrou's mother did say that they agreed for Aidou to come like this, to keep an eye on him. But it's more than

that. Aidou's as fond of Genrou as his parents are — even if he doesn't realise it, her fussing and nagging is her way of showing him affection. She's protecting him because she's afraid of what he'll do if she doesn't… and given all of this, she's probably got a point. Being around him is high maintenance — it's a stressful existance. No wonder she's so strong as she is. I hope I can be that strong — if I can make Genrou want me around, I'll have to be."

"Hotohori-sama?"

Chichiri's anxious voice startled her from her reverie at that moment and she turned, casting a glance towards the former Emperor. As she did so, a gasp escaped her lips, and her hand flew to her mouth.

"Hotohori-sama." She whispered. "I can… see *through* you!"

"He's a ghost." Aidou looked disturbed. "Is… is he?"

Chichiri frowned, holding out his hand to brush the man's shoulder, and at the physical contact, Hotohori offered a smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm tired." he admitted. "I suppose this body has its limitations. It's as you say, Chichiri — not a permanent solution. And I have taxed it to its limits tonight. Perhaps I should withdraw — and rest. I will be of more use to you and Tasuki both while I retain physical form, after all — I had better not destroy this body before we have a chance to find the others."

"I think so." Chichiri eyed him critically. "I wish I could give you some of my life-force, but I don't think I have any more to give right now."

"I'll be all right." Hotohori shook his head. "My spirit is fine… it's just that I am not as physically strong as I was when I was living."

He smiled again, as he got to his feet, moving towards the door.

"My spirit is actually stronger than it has been since I first came to myself." he admitted. "I think the last of my memories returned, while helping to drive out Tasuki's demons. I know who I am entirely now, and it is quite all right. I'll rest, and no doubt I'll regain my strength. Just as you should — just because you have living forms, it doesn't mean you should take that for granted."

With that he was gone, and the remaining travellers exchanged glances.

"Hotohori-sama is right." Aidou reflected. "You must be tired. And

hungry. All of you."

Her gaze flitted to Tasuki, then,

"Not that you deserve anyone to wait on you, but even so…"

"I'm not hungry." Tasuki shook his head. "Jus' tired an' thirsty. That's all."

"Then I'll go get you some cold water to drink." Anzu suggested, getting to her feet. "Your fever was pretty high, so no doubt you need fluids to regain your strength. It won't take me long — I'll be right back."

"No, you stay here, Anzu." Chichiri told her with a smile, gesturing to the wooden pail that stood beneath the window. "We have water — it's fresh. And I think, considering you're chief nurse in all of this, you should be the one to stay with the patient… don't you? At least until he falls asleep."

"Chichiri, what the hell are you playin' at?" Tasuki's eyes widened at this, but Anzu's heart leapt as she read the expression in the monk's eyes. She nodded her head.

"I'll do that." She said softly. "Thank you, Chichiri."

"Good." Chichiri's good eye sparkled. "Then Aidou and I will leave you to it. I could use some fresh air after that little battle, you know."

Anzu saw a look pass between the monk and Tasuki's sister, and she felt colour rise in her cheeks as Aidou shot her a comprehending glance.

"I'll come with you, Chichiri-san." She said evenly, offering Anzu a smile as she got to her feet. "I'll trust you to look after Shun'u, Anzu. Don't let me down, huh? And don't let him give you any trouble… if he does, just let me know."

With that, the two were gone, and Anzu found herself left alone with the man she loved.

For a moment, she felt shy, wondering absently how much of what she had said to him he remembered. Her eyes strayed to the neat pile of upper clothing in the corner, and her cheeks flushed slightly as she realised that when she had flung herself on top of him, it had been against his bare skin. In the awkwardness that followed, she registered the fact that he was still so un-attired, and she swallowed, unsure about how to begin a conversation. Silence fell, as she busied herself with fetching him water to drink, setting the mug down beside the bed. For a moment she looked at him, wondering his thoughts. Then,

hesitantly, she offered a hand to pull him up.

“I can sit up by myself, you know.” Tasuki said bluntly, pushing her hand away, as he struggled to prove himself right. Something in the frankness of his tones seemed to break through Anzu’s sudden coyness, and as he managed to succeed, she grinned in self-conscious relief, settling herself down on the floor beside him as he drained the vessel dry.

“There’s quite a lot more, if you want it.” She said companionably. “I can always fetch another pail.”

Tasuki did not answer, merely eying her cautiously. Then he set the mug down, pursing his lips.

“Gimme my shirt, huh? It’s cold in here.”

Anzu started, then she pinkened again, nodding as she reached over to grab it. She held it out, and Tasuki cast her another wary look as he slipped it over his shoulders, pulling it around his body.

“If it were the other way around, you’d be slappin’ me.” He said bluntly. “You don’t haveta gawk.”

Anzu looked stricken, her cheeks flushing red, and despite his obvious tiredness, a faint, wolfish smile touched Tasuki’s lips as he registered her loss in composure.

“Well, jus’ saying.” He said flippantly, as he fastened the fabric, rolling back his right sleeve to gaze down at his arm. As he flexed his fingers, the symbol for ‘wings’ glittered against his skin, its former strength restored, and he nodded slightly, as if satisfied.

“Goddamn demons.” He muttered. “Good thing I know they don’t like it if ya burn ’em up.”

Anzu did not answer, merely eying him uncertainly, and Tasuki frowned, folding his arms across his chest as he leant up against the wall of the room. Despite his recovery, the toll of fighting the byouma was clear on his usually animated features and Anzu noted with some concern the tiredness in his bronze eyes, half wondering if she should be letting him move so freely so soon after breaking such a turbulent fever.

“What’s eatin’ you?” The bandit’s question broke her reverie, and she started, offering him a smile.

“Nothing.” She assured him, shaking her head. “I’m just… sorry I was… in here. You know. When you didn’t have your shirt… I didn’t think…”

She trailed off, and Tasuki offered her another wolfish smile.

“You could take your clothes off, and then we’d be even.” He suggested. Anzu’s eyes widened, and Tasuki snorted.

“Yeesh, I was teasin’ you.” He scolded. “Can’t you take a joke?”

“A… joke?” Anzu stared at him blankly, struggling to register the fact that the man who, minutes earlier had been fighting death was now making fun of her. For a moment, she just sat there. Then, as the funny side of it struck her, she grinned back, shrugging her shoulders as she wiped the last of her tears from her lashes.

“Guess not.” She said lightly. “Besides, I don’t take my clothes off for bandits who scare me half to death almost dying of demon fevers, so you’re outta luck this time around.”

Tasuki stared at her, as if trying to work out whether or not she was serious, and as she realised his thought process, she chuckled, shaking her head slowly.

Tasuki frowned, eying her quizzically.

“All right. Spit it out.” He ordered.

“Huh?” Anzu looked startled.

“Whatever it is that’s makin’ you act weird on me. It’s driving me crazy, an’ my head’s buzzin’ enough without your help.”

“What do you mean, weird?” Anzu frowned. “I’m not acting weird. I’m just relieved you’re okay… that’s all.”

“So much so that you try to smother me?” Tasuki’s eyebrow arched at this. “An’ Chichiri calls you a nurse? More like a flamin’ menace!”

Anzu chuckled, unperturbed.

“You can’t say anything to upset me tonight.” She said firmly. “Really, you can’t, so you might as well save your strength.”

“An’ she says she ain’t acting weird.” Tasuki muttered. He rubbed his temples, glancing down at the discarded tessen ruefully.

“I really am gonna kill Mitsukake, when I see him.” He admitted. “Even if he is already dead, I’m gonna give him somethin’ to think about. Infectin’ me with that damn thing… what the hell was that about, anyway? What’s wrong with this damn world! First his Highness an’ my village. Then Mitsukake tries to kill me — I’m goin’ to get a complex, if this goes on. I’ll be lookin’ out for Nuriko droppin’ rocks on my head at this rate.”

“Do you think you’ll go back to Choukou, now?” Anzu asked anxiously, and Tasuki shrugged.

“Ask Chichiri.” He said frankly. “Not me. Right now I’m too tired to care, to be honest. That thing really *was* a demon — it damn well hurt like hell, an’ I feel mangled… whatever we do, it can wait till morning.”

He sank back against his folded-*kesa* pillow with a weary sigh, and Anzu frowned, scooping up the spare blanket and drawing it over his body.

“You should rest.” She agreed. “Sleep, and regain your strength. You were really brave, Genrou — fighting that thing, even though it was eating away at you. And then using the tessen to protect me — thank you for that. Considering how weak you were…”

She faltered, and Tasuki snorted.

“That’s the problem with you damn women.” He said blurrily, and Anzu realised that he was already on the verge of falling asleep. “You always need someone to damn well protect you…”

With that his eyes closed, and as his breathing became regular and even, Anzu gazed down at him affectionately.

“You don’t remember.” She mused. “But it doesn’t matter. Everything feels so different, now. Now I know my own strength a little more. I helped you — even without Suzaku’s power, I was able to make a difference. This time I protected you too, Genrou… maybe I’ll finally find a way to prove myself to you, after all.”

A spell.

Nuriko’s eyes snapped open, and he drew a sharp breath, sitting up in bed as he struggled to make out the sharp sensation that had just darted across his senses. It was still late, he realised, and outside the window, the moon hung high in the sky, sending haphazard light down onto the terrain below. But it had not been a stray shard of moonlight that had drawn him from his peaceful sleep.

Pulling the blanket more tightly around his shoulders, he shuffled off the low-slung bed, being careful not to disturb his sleeping companions as he moved to the window. From the far corner, Tamatama let out a snore, but Nuriko was too lost in thought to even smile at the unusual sound. He frowned, touching the thick curtain that divided him from the world outside. Then, hesitantly, he slipped it back, ducking around it so that he would not let the light of the

clear night into the room.

“What was that?” He muttered, his gaze drawn up to the sky over his head as he did so. “What did I just…? A spell? But… what? Why did it wake me… what was it?”

He ran his gaze over the constellations, a curse falling from his lips as he registered the absence of Tamahome’s stars in the night sky.

“I should have seen that before.” He berated himself. “Tama’s not there. But… is it that which woke me? Is something going on in Miaka’s world… or is it just this one that’s messed around?”

“Nuriko?”

A soft voice at his left hand made him jump, swinging around to meet the guarded gaze of the doctor, and he sighed, letting out his breath in a rush.

“I might be dead, but that doesn’t mean you can creep up on me and give me a heart attack.” He scolded, only just keeping his voice down. “Mitsukake, you made me jump. Give me a little more warning next time, will you?”

“Sorry.” Mitsukake looked contrite. “I heard you moving — what are you looking at?”

“Just stars.” Nuriko sighed. “And wondering… something woke me, but I don’t know what it was. Maybe I’m just restless. I don’t know.”

“No… no.” Mitsukake shook his head, turning his head to glance at the night sky. “Something woke me too. Not you — something else.”

“Really?” Nuriko looked startled. “A sort of… spell type thing? Or… something… involving magic?”

The doctor nodded solemnly, and excitement leapt in Nuriko’s heart.

“Chichiri.” He breathed. “Do you think… could he be… trying to reach us?”

“I have no idea.” Mitsukake admitted. “But there is a constellation missing, Nuriko. Tamahome’s stars are no longer over us.”

“No, I saw that, too.” Nuriko admitted. “I hadn’t, till now. I was so preoccupied with untangling my mental state that I didn’t think to look up.”

“Perhaps the two are connected?”

“Perhaps they are.” Nuriko frowned, as Tamatama let out another

snore, mumuring softly in his sleep. “Look, here isn’t a good place to talk. Let’s go down there… outside, in the courtyard. Noone’s around, and we can talk without waking him… he’ll just worry, if he hears us babbling about missing stars and magic spells.”

“All right.” Mitsukake nodded his head. “I’m right behind you.”

“You seem a little more yourself, if you don’t mind my saying.” Nuriko observed, as he flung his cape around his shoulders, pushing open the door of the chamber and indicating for his well-built friend to follow him. “Less confused. You spotted the stars right away — are you feeling better?”

“I… think I remember more things than I did.” Mitsukake nodded. “My body was so tired when I met you and Tamatama-san that I’m not sure what was going through my thoughts. But yes, I feel more together, now.”

He sighed, casting a glance at his still bound left hand.

“I am now quite certain I did meet Tasuki, and that it was somewhere near Choukou that it happened.” He said slowly. “But I… I am sure that I did something terrible, Nuriko. To a friend who came to offer me his assistance — something quite terrible indeed.”

“What sort of terrible?” Nuriko peered around the edge of the corridor, then nodded, grabbing his friend by the arm and pulling him down the back steps towards the courtyard, neatly wrenching the door open and stepping out into the moonlight. “There. Now we can talk without fear of waking anyone up. What do you mean — what kind of thing?”

Mitsukake held up his hand, flexing his fingers as he did so.

“Byouma.” He said softly.

“Byouma?” Nuriko faltered, staring at him, and Mitsukake nodded.

“The same disease that took Shouka from me.” He agreed gravely. “The demon disease that wracked through my neighbours’ families and almost killed my closest childhood friend, also. The disease that my Suzaku power is meant to quell… but my power… everything… I was not myself. Nothing was… was right. Byouma feeds on negativity… and my soul was founded on the same, when I first… when I first had awareness of even existing here in this world again. I fear… instead of being a healer, I have become… an instrument… of a spectral byouma. That through my own doubts and insecurities, I have conveyed the touch of death into one of my friends.”

Nuriko paled, as he remembered the encounter in Choukou with the demon-possessed Shouka.

“You’re serious?” He whispered. “You think… you gave Tasuki… like Shouka had…?”

Mitsukake nodded.

“And I don’t know how to reverse it.” He said helplessly, pain in his voice as he made his admission. “If my power is no longer functioning, then I do not know how to cure a byouma. I… I am afraid of what I have done, Nuriko… that is why I want to find him, and try… even if it’s hopeless… to prevent worse.”

“Oh hell.” Nuriko sank down onto a step, biting his lip as he digested this. “And you think… could it kill… him? Tasuki’s not exactly prone to negative vibes — couldn’t he fight it off? I mean, he’s one of us — he’s stronger than most people. Do you think…?”

“I don’t know.” Mitsukake murmured, and at the expression on his face, Nuriko sighed, coming to put a comforting arm around his friend’s body.

“Well, we’ll just have to track him down and make sure that there is something, won’t we?” He said matter-of-factly. “If you’re coming back to yourself, Mitsukake, maybe your power is too. I couldn’t control my strength at all until everything fell into its proper place. Maybe it’s the same with you — you might yet be able to heal him, so we should track him down.”

Mitsukake gazed up at the skies, his expression heavy.

“If it’s not already too late.” He murmured. “You think that it was Chichiri sending us a signal, Nuriko… but…”

“But you think it was… something else?” Nuriko frowned. “Do you think, then, that Chichiri and Tasuki are together, somewhere in this part of Kounan? And that the reason we both woke up with the sense of magic in our heads is because Chichiri’s flaring his powers far and wide across the landscape — that he’s drawing on as much of it as he can muster… to help Tasuki?”

Mitsukake inclined his head slightly, and Nuriko rested his chin in his hands.

“Is Chichiri strong enough to displace a demon on his own?” He asked doubtfully. “He *is* strong — no doubt about that. But… even so…”

“If that is what is happening, he will do what he can to help Tasuki,

even if it costs him his own life." Mitsukake said, his voice troubled. "If I had never touched Tasuki with my hand… but… it was all such a blur. My mind… until I touched him… I did not know who I was or anything except that the woman I loved was there and that I was the one who had to take her life. I could not think… I could not prevent…"

Nuriko rested a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Chichiri and Tasuki are strong enough to deal with this, I'm sure." He said firmly, although a lingering doubt flickered in the back of his mind. "They aren't going to join our dead-guy club just yet… I'm pretty confident that it takes a lot to kill someone like Tasuki, anyway. And Chichiri's got more and more powerful since we began fighting for Suzaku. If he is with Tasuki — I'm sure he's thought of something."

He frowned, thinking things over.

"Your encounter with Tasuki woke you up to yourself." He mused. "I wonder if that's important."

"Not if it results in his death, Nuriko." Mitsukake shook his head. "I can*not* be responsible for the passing of someone else I care about."

"You're not going to be." Nuriko said firmly. "So stop it with this, all right? Being depressed and self-criticising isn't going to help anything. Believe me, I've already been through that step… and if you want to be of use to Tasuki or anyone, you need to focus yourself. Be the doctor I know you are — the guy who was so convinced of his power to heal that he sacrificed his own life to help the war wounded. That's the Mitsukake I need right now."

"I'm sorry." Mitsukake looked contrite. "You're right. The only thing I can do now is find Tasuki and try and undo any damage I have done."

"And tomorrow, that's what we'll do. If Chichiri and Tasuki are nearby, we'll find them." Nuriko said grimly. "Enough pleasure-jaunting in northern cities. This is obviously a lot more serious than a simple anomaly, and I need to stop being flippant. First thing, we're going to hunt down our fellow Seishi. I'm not as good at sensing chi as Chichiri and nor are you — but between us, we might be able to get a fix on him. Especially if he's pitching his signals so far and wide."

Mitsukake hesitated for a moment, then he nodded his head.

"Tomorrow." He agreed. "No matter what."

“That was a… a close call, you know.”

As Aidou closed the door of the would-be sick room softly behind her, her companion stumbled, raising a hand to his head as a wave of dizzy exhaustion washed over him. He reached out for the wall to steady himself, and Aidou let out an exclamation, hurrying to help him stand more upright.

“Chichiri-san!” She murmured. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Just tired.” Chichiri turned, offering her a rueful smile. “It took a lot of energy, but I’m okay.”

Aidou frowned, comprehension flickering in her expression.

“You gave my brother everything you had to help him, didn’t you?” She reflected. “All of your strength, to drive that demon out. Didn’t you?”

Chichiri shrugged.

“It’s sort of instinctive, you know.” He admitted. “Besides, Tasuki’s like a younger brother to me, too. And I don’t want to be the last one again, that’s all. I just did what I had to do — my powers are there to protect and defend my friends… so a wise doctor once told me. And he was right. So I just did what was natural. That’s all.”

“Shun’u… will definitely be all right now?”

“I think so.” Chichiri nodded. “Now the demon’s gone, and he can rest. He was silly, rushing in like that — but I don’t think he’s taken any permanent harm from it. I’m not a doctor, and my knowledge is limited — but I’m pretty sure he’ll be okay. I can’t sense the byouma any more — I really think that his tessen destroyed it.”

He pushed open the outer door, stepping out into the moonlight and sinking down onto the stone wall as he gazed up at the starry sky. After a moment of hesitation, Aidou followed suit.

“What did you mean, you don’t want to be the last one?” She asked curiously. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve lost a lot of friends, fighting for Suzaku.” Chichiri reflected. “I’m not afraid to admit that it’s hurt, each time one of them stopped. Even as spirits, or reconstituted beings — they’re not here in the same way as they were before. Hotohori-sama and the others should already have been reborn, and I have a feeling that if we succeed in righting everything, that will be the end result. We will be saying a final goodbye, you know? So I didn’t want to lose Tasuki, too. It may sound strange, for a monk who travels in his own company and never minds

solitude — but I didn't want to be the last Suzaku warrior left, that's all."

He shrugged.

"But Tasuki's life force has always blazed from him like the fire he wields from his tessen." He added. "I think it would take a lot to kill him — so I'm not worried, now."

"There's a difference between being alone and being lonely." Aidou reflected, and Chichiri sent her a startled look.

"Exactly." He agreed. "Though you sound like you speak from experience."

"Perhaps I do." Aidou shrugged her shoulders. She eyed him keenly, and Chichiri frowned, his finger going absently to his scarred eye.

"I should wear my mask more. I'm sorry." He reflected. "It's easy to forget, these days, when I'm travelling as Chichiri."

"You don't have to do that on my account." Aidou assured him. "I'm not troubled by your appearance, and I think it's stupid you should have to hide it. If people don't bother to look beyond it, they're not worth knowing… that's what my mother would say, and I know that it's true. You've been good to my brother, and he trusts you — maybe more than he does any of his family. Your scar is just something that's there. It doesn't define who you are."

"I'm not sure." Chichiri's lips twitched into a slight smile. "To be honest, I have the power to heal it. When we parted — the last time Mitsukake was truly himself — he gave me his holy water, in order for me to mend my damaged face. But to be truthful, it's almost become a part of me now. To erase it would be to erase a memory — so I've not done it, yet. I left it behind at Reikaku-zan, which was careless of me… I've been careless a lot recently, with hindsight — I wonder if this world's strange atmosphere has had a greater effect on me than I thought. Had I had it with me, I might have been able to help Tasuki sooner… and I could have given it to you or Tasuki to help heal your father's leg, now I think of it. It's foolish, but I really didn't think of it, with this weighing on my mind."

He shrugged.

"When we get back, I will rectify that." He promised. "Either way, I haven't sought to use it at all yet — not where my eye is concerned. I'm not certain if it will even have the same effect, coming from me and not from Mitsukake himself. Maybe one day I'll feel differently

about it — but for now, the scar and I, we seem to belong."

"That's a funny thing to say." Aidou looked confused. "If you could heal it — why wouldn't you? Surely it's no good for your sight, for one thing — having one eye missing like that."

"Yes, true, but my right eye and my spiritual senses have compensated." Chichiri responded. "It's just that this… is a personal memory. That's all. A way of keeping with me a friend who I lost a long time ago."

He smiled sadly.

"My village was destroyed too, so I understand how it must have felt to see yours engulfed in flame." He added. "In my case, it was a flooding river."

He gestured across towards where the Shouryuu river glittered and flowed in the bright moonlight.

"That river." He added. "When this farm flooded was the same time my family and Mitsukake's also were wiped out by it's raging tides. I have a bittersweet connection to this river, I suppose… in that particular flood I was the only survivor from my area. My parents, my sister, my fiancée and my closest friend all perished that day. I was the only one who did not."

"I didn't know." Aidou's expression softened, and Chichiri shrugged.

"It was a long time ago, now." He reflected. "I was a little younger than Tasuki is, when it all happened. It was a hard time — not understanding why I'd lived and so many had died. And I carried the guilt with me, too — for my friend."

He pursed his lips.

"We had fought over the woman I hoped to make my wife." He admitted. "When the flood waters came, he was swept away into the depths. I tried to reach him — I tried to hold on. But I lost my grip and he was taken and drowned. That was the day I lost my eye — almost as if it was punishing me, the river sent a log up into my face and it gouged the eye out. I probably shouldn't have survived that wound, either, since it was a hefty blow. My immediate memories of the aftermath of the flood are hazy, and I don't remember clearly everything that happened, but I know that it was Suzaku's power that saved my life. It was Mitsukake… though at the time I couldn't even register it, or who he was, or be grateful for it… I was even angry that he'd helped me to live. Yet now I know that I was saved so that I

could do Suzaku's work when the time was right… that it wasn't time for me to die, no matter how much I wanted to. And yet…"

He trailed off, touching his left eye once more.

"This is my memory of failing to rescue Hikou." He concluded. "Even though it no longer tortures me the way it did. I accept that I can't change it… but because of that fact, I don't feel I can change myself, either. This is the legacy of that day — of doubting in a friend, and in broken trust and betrayal. I won't make those mistakes with my Seishi companions… and so long as I have this, I can always remember."

"That's silly, if you don't mind my saying." Aidou said pragmatically, and Chichiri stared at her.

"I'm sorry?"

"That you think you let your friend die… that you should be punished." Aidou folded her hands in her lap, eying him evenly. "You're a logical man, Chichiri-san. You're smart and you think things through. But you can't see that your injury isn't a sign you let someone die. It's a sign you tried to help him live."

"I don't…?"

"If you'd really saved your own life over his — if you'd really been selfish enough to let him drown just to save your own skin, you might be considered a coward, but only human at the end of it." Aidou said calmly. "But that scar proves you didn't do anything of the sort. You're *not* a coward, you've showed me that tonight — do you think I'm naive enough not to realise that this demon that almost killed my brother would have done the same to you if you'd let your guard down even for a moment? Yet you still put yourself on the line to help him, regardless of that. And this is no different from that time then, if you ask me. You wouldn't have gotten hurt if you had not tried, honestly and sincerely, to save the man you called friend. Even though you had fought — you still tried your best to save him, just like you did Shun'u tonight. Didn't you? You're too hard on yourself. If you must wear your scar as anything, it should be as a badge that you wanted to save your friend, not as a punishment for failin'."

Chichiri gaped, for once completely lost for words, and Aidou grinned, shrugging her shoulders.

"Besides, past is past." She added. "You said already that it can't be changed. You shouldn't wear a mask, Chichiri-san. Don't shield people who are ignorant… it ain't your problem, it's theirs."

She frowned, dropping her gaze.

“I have to admit, the first time I saw it, it did… repel me. It was… a shock, because I realised you’d lost the eye completely.” She confessed. “It reminded me of the war — I wondered if that was how it had happened, in battle. But I’m ashamed of it, now — of letting it cloud my judgement. You helped save Shun’u’s life, even if it’d cost you your own. I’ve seen the man beyond the scar on this trip, once and for all.”

Chichiri laughed.

“You sound so solemn, but it’s all right.” He assured her. “I’m not worried by people who don’t like how I look. Perhaps I do it to save them the distress, rather than to hide myself… I don’t know. The nature of my magic makes me someone who prefers the shadows — hiding behind a mask can be kind of fun, you know?”

Mischief flickered in his tired eye, and Aidou returned the smile.

“How do you manage, stayin’ so upbeat and full of jokes and laughter, when you lost everyone you were ever close to?” She asked softly. “I can’t imagine being able to do that. Losing the village — the farm — that was bad enough. And… there was someone I had, once, who was lost in the war — losing him was about as much as I could bear to face. I couldn’t imagine… all my sisters, Shun’u, my family… everything. How are you able to smile, Chichiri-san?”

“For a long time, I didn’t.” Chichiri admitted. “In fact, for a long time I wished the river had taken me too — or instead. But… the truth is, meeting Miaka and *becoming* Chichiri… it made me understand that the past can’t be changed but the future could. I saw then that I had a purpose. Also, though, I made some very strong bonds and found some true friends, when I took up my post for Suzaku. Tasuki’s one of those friends. And so it’s as you said. I can still be alone — but these days I’m very rarely lonely. And you can’t be unhappy, when there’s so much to be grateful for… you know?”

Aidou frowned, digesting this for a moment. Then she nodded.

“I think I see.” She admitted. “That’s what makes you and Shun’u different. You appreciate what you have — I don’t think he has a blind clue.”

“Really?” Chichiri looked pensive. “I don’t agree. Of all of us, Tasuki’s probably the one who’s taken it hardest, each time we’ve lost someone. I think he carries the concept of friendship far more than anyone I’ve ever met — he’s tactless and reckless at times, but he

believes in people. And in placing his whole trust in those people, too. He's never concealed any part of himself from us — good or bad. The rest of us… I don't think we can say the same. We've all had secrets — things we wanted to keep back until we were sure. Tasuki was always sure — we were his friends, and that was enough."

"You think so?" Aidou was surprised. Chichiri nodded.

"I've learnt things from him just as sure as he's learnt from me." He agreed. "That's part of being a Seishi, at the end of the day. We are connected to one another even beyond death and separation — you know?"

"No… but I'm starting to." Aidou admitted.

She paused, then cast him a glance.

"You have another name, don't you?" She hazarded, and Chichiri looked surprised.

"Another name?"

"Like Shun'u… he has so many names." Aidou spread her hands. "You call him Tasuki. Anzu and the bandits call him Genrou. And to me he's just my stupid brother Shun'u, nothin' else. But everyone calls you Chichiri — you must have another name. Don't you? Before you were one of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi? Who were you, in your old life — when you lived in your village? That is, if it's not too painful for you to tell me."

"I don't mind." Chichiri grinned. "Ri Hou Jun. That's my real name. Though you're right — there are very few people who use it, these days. When I went after Miaka, I took up the identity the stars had given me full time. Ri Hou Jun took a step into the shadows. When this is all over, though, I expect I'll be him again. When there's no longer a need to be Chichiri."

"Then would you mind if I called you Hou Jun?" Aidou pinkened slightly, awkwardness in her expression. "It's nothing funny. I mean, it's just… I feel on safer ground with people, knowing them as they really are. All this Beast God business has… always been hard for my family. Shun'u's my brother, not some God's tool to throw around… and now I think you and I are friends. So I don't want to think of you that way, either. I'd like to think of you as a real person, not just a constellation of Suzaku. It's just better that way."

She smiled.

"After all, if you consider Shun'u like a younger brother, that would

almost make us family, wouldn't it?" She added.

"All right." Chichiri chuckled. "If you want, I don't mind."

"And you must call me Aidou." Aidou added. "Not Aidou-san. You're not so formal with Anzu — I'd rather you extended the same to me."

"If that's how you'd rather." Chichiri nodded. "I suppose, since we're family."

He winked, the gesture seeming odd on his lopsided, scar-marked face, and despite herself, Aidou grinned.

"You're a strange person, you know." She said thoughtfully. "I just think I have your measure and you surprise me again."

She cocked her head on one side, sending him a keen glance.

"You're older than Shun'u, I know that." She added. "How old *are* you, Hou Jun? Shun'u behaves so much like a baby sometimes that it's hard to tell for sure, but sometimes you seem, well, a lot older."

"I'm almost twenty seven." Chichiri responded with a wry smile. "Why do you ask?"

"You don't ever worry, then, about being too old to, well, settle and have a family? That those things have passed you by?"

"Since I lost Koran, I've not given it a thought." Chichiri admitted. "I'm an itinerant monk, and that's the life I've adopted… at least, at the moment. It's not a concern I have… after all, I don't suppose I'll ever find another Koran."

He smiled.

"You must feel the same, though. If you lost someone in the war."

"Yes." Aidou looked pensive. "But it's more difficult for a woman. I mean, to be on your own. I could stay at home and keep house for my family, but I also feel that now with the farm gone I'll be a burden. So I'm not sure, really, what options are left open to me. I'm almost twenty four — I was the oldest of my sisters, and they're all settled before me. It leaves me… a little empty inside."

She spread her hands.

"Shun'u doesn't know about that, by the way. That I lost someone." She added. "I'd rather he didn't. He's a tactless oaf and he'd say somethin' — the memory isn't something I'm happy discussin' with him yet. Two years may seem a long time, but it ain't really. I mean,

not completely. Not to heal entirely."

"I understand, and I shan't say anything to him." Chichiri promised. "It was three years before I even began to see light again, after Koran died. I know how it is for you, Aidou — you can trust in my discretion, you know?"

"I thought I could. That's why I told you." Aidou smoothed out her skirts. "You're easy to talk to. And it's nice to talk to a man who I don't have to knock sense into every few minutes, too."

She looked rueful.

"I suppose I feel about men the way Shun'u does about women." She acknowledged sheepishly. "My father is a ghost of a man, who never seems to make his voice heard… he's always been that way, and I expect he always will. Shun'u is a hot-headed, loud mouthed clot hell-bent on gettin' himself killed. The one man I put faith in fell fighting for Kounan against Kutou… I'd pretty much given up on them as a whole. But you're changing my mind a little. It's nice to be able to just talk to a man without bein' afraid he's going to rape me, or say something stupid, or let me down. I feel I can trust you, and that being in your company is safe. It makes a change."

"Your view of men is a bit jaded, if you don't mind my saying so." Chichiri said lightly. "You surely don't think that *all* men are lurking waiting to rape unsuspecting women?"

"No, and I'd give them a broken nose and something else to remember me by, if they ever tried it on me." Aidou said pragmatically. "But it does happen. Men drink, they brag, they swear, and they look at women like they're just objects they can play with."

She hesitated, then,

"It's not been unknown for strangers to come after our family, from time to time." She added. "Because there were so many girls, and Shun'u was unreliable in terms of his presence at home. Dad was useless… he always has been, in defending his family from harm. One of my younger sisters was almost raped once on our own land by one of those evil Kutou spies lurking around the farm. I've never forgotten it — I suppose it marked out for me how far some men will go to get what they want. That's all."

"Your sister was all right, I trust?" Chichiri's expression became grave. "Kutou's regime was… at that time… capable of a lot of evil things."

"She was." Aidou nodded. "Fortunately, Shun'u was actually

around when it happened, and he took the stranger on, if I remember right, in a heated pitched battle in the family's barn. Then he left us with the aftermath to deal with, which was kind of him… but still, at least he happened to be around."

She looked rueful.

"He was a bandit, after all." She said evenly. "And we couldn't count on seeing him two months together. Still true, by the way. Although if anything, with Suzaku's calling, it's even less now than it was then."

She sighed.

"But men can be devils. Real devils." She concluded. "Present company excepted, of course. That's why I hate those bandits of Shun'u's. They're just like that — rogues and thieves and God knows what else."

"But you *don't* believe Tasuki's that way, do you?" Chichiri reminded her gently. "You just told me that he defended your sister's honour and I can't imagine him doing anything else, can you? And the Reikaku-zan bandits may be thieves and rogues — but they're not all ill-natured. They did put out the fire in the village — perhaps you're being too hard on them."

"Perhaps I am." Aidou acknowledged, letting out a weary sigh. "And you're right, I couldn't think of Shun'u acting that way. Idiot as he is, I don't think he'd hurt a woman. At least, not in that way. He's spent too much time with women — I don't think he'd dare."

Chichiri was silent for a while, considering this.

"I think that way too." He agreed after a moment of thought. "Which is why I have no qualms about leaving him and Anzu alone together. He's not going to do anything to hurt her, and truly, after the night they've both had, it won't hurt for them to have some time to regroup."

Aidou cast a glance back towards the small house, then,

"You think so? I'm thinking that maybe leaving them alone so long wasn't such a good idea. Anzu was very emotional — and Shun'u doesn't deal with those things very well. He might say something he shouldn't."

"I think they need it." Chichiri said wisely. "She did as much as me, if not more, to bring him out of this. They need some time, now."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you were trying to ensure

my brother and this girl formed an attachment." Aidou shot him a suspicious look, and Chichiri laughed.

"I don't interfere in that stuff, you know?" He said innocently. "I just let nature take its course. But the strength of her emotion — that's a powerful thing. Her love helped bring him back… and in that respect, it seems only fair to give her a chance to explain that to him — if she can."

"You think that it was all one way?" Aidou looked surprised, then she shook her head. "I'm not so sure. Though I've never really seen my brother with a woman before — I suppose, at the end of the day, he *is* a man. And Anzu — she's a pretty girl with a lot of good qualities. Even he can't be so blind as to ignore it."

"I'm rather banking on that fact." Chichiri mused, rubbing his chin. "Tasuki's got to learn that hating women isn't his natural instinct. And Anzu is determined. I'm not sure, yet, how he feels. Though I tease him, I've noticed he's been consciously holding back from her — as if he's afraid of what might happen if he lets himself too close. So it might be better that we're not around to play chaperone with them. They're young — let them learn together, you know?"

"You sound like someone's old grandpa, talking like that."

"I'll settle for oniichan." Chichiri laughed. "Just because I'm happy drifting and spending time by myself — I don't think Tasuki will be, you know? And if this the end for the Suzaku campaign, well, I'd like to know someone was there to look out for him, even if I'm not always on Reikaku-zan."

He got to his feet, stretching and stifling a yawn.

"For now, though, I think I'll settle for dinner and bed." He admitted. "It was really a close thing this evening, Aidou. I don't think I could have given him any more of my strength, even if I'd destroyed myself doing it. I'm glad Anzu could. It just goes to show that everyone is powerful in their own way, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does." Aidou smiled. "I'll have to remember that."

Chichiri grinned at her, nodding his head.

"Then let's go back." He suggested. "Get some rest. Tomorrow, there's a lot of things to decide… but for now, we should take advantage of a moment's respite. Both Tasuki and I will be much better after a night's sleep, I'm sure, and then we can look at the next move. Kounan still needs us, after all… so we'd better all be ready for what the morning brings."

Random Babble:

Mitsukake is the one who saves Chichiri's life after the flood, if you believe Oumei Den. At least, Chichiri is found and Mitsukake heals his wounds as best he can… until Chichiri pushes him away and leaves. I think it's pretty impossible that Mitsukake at least didn't make the connection when they next met up — after all, the eye wound is pretty distinctive — and the flood isn't something either of them would forget. Whether Chichiri was in any state to remember or whether they discussed it or not, noone knows… but Mitsukake and Chichiri do seem to share a bond and I'm sure that it must have come up in conversation sooner or later…

Chapter 18

Chapter Seventeen

Morning.

Tasuki opened his eyes, half-wishing he hadn't bothered as the gleam of sunlight through the window dazzled him, reminding him cruelly of the events of the previous night. With a muttered curse, he dragged himself into a sitting position, assessing his aching body ruefully as he realised that, at the very least, he was in one piece. As he glanced around him, he almost let out a yell of surprise as he took in Anzu's form curled up beside his bed, huddled beneath a blanket as she slept peacefully. For a moment he stared at her in disbelief, then, very carefully, he got to his feet, moving around her as he sought to leave the confines of the small room.

Somehow, having her so close unnerved him, but he could not quite put his finger on why.

"You're up and about. That's good to see, you know."

Chichiri's voice from the doorway made him glance up, nodding ruefully.

"I'm all right. Jus' mangled. I'll live."

"So I see." Chichiri grinned, leaning up against the doorpost. "Hungry? Aidou's gone in search of breakfast."

"Yeah. Starvin'." Tasuki admitted, running his hand through his wild red hair as he nodded his head. "I really didn't eat anythin', yesterday, feelin' so weird an' all. I could eat a horse right now, if you gave me one with a pair o' chopsticks an' some sauce."

Chichiri chuckled, appreciation glittering in his ruby eye at this.

"You *are* better." he said frankly. "So I imagine we won't stay here long. We still have people to find, you know? And we have to decide what to do… about Mitsukake."

"Mm." Tasuki nodded. He frowned, then,

"You're all right?"

"Huh?" Chichiri looked startled.

“You… used your life force to help me last night, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “And so did Hotohori-sama. What about it?”

“You didn’t blast yourself out on my account, did you?”

“No.” Chichiri’s expression softened, and he shook his head. “I’m fine, Tasuki. Like you, I slept off our battle with the demon and I’m hungry and ready to face the next challenge.”

“Good.” Tasuki looked relieved. “Because you and me — we’re the only ones not dead, and all of that. I don’t want to lose another friend, especially not because of me and a stupid demon.”

Chichiri laughed.

“You and I are much more difficult to kill than that.” He assured the bandit. “You needn’t worry. We’ve both got things to do in this world, I’m sure of that — Suzaku won’t take either of us yet.”

“Well, if he tries for either of us, I’ll whack him with my tessen.” Tasuki said decidedly.

He turned, jerking his head in the direction of the sleeping Anzu.

“Has she been there all night?”

“Yes. She didn’t want to leave your side, so in the end, she wound up sleeping with you.” Chichiri’s good eye twinkled with mischief, and Tasuki grimaced.

“Quit it with the innuendo.” He ordered. “I don’t even remember much about last night… if she chose to sleep here, it had nothing to do with me.”

“Actually, I think it probably had quite a lot to do with you.” Chichiri looked pensive. “She loves you, you know. More than I imagined she did — last night she really proved it. You should be thanking her, too, Tasuki. She’s probably the one that turned the scale in your favour.”

“Huh?” Tasuki looked startled, and Chichiri nodded.

“It was her determination and her strength that brought you out of your coma.” He said gravely. “She’s just an ordinary girl, really, but she has something extraordinary about her — and that’s how strongly you’ve touched her. You probably don’t realise it, but she was willing to take the demon into her own body last night, and die with you, if that was what it meant. She was completely determined — totally without hesitation. And her strength and faith in you brought you to yourself. Without Anzu’s gamble, Tasuki-kun, it might have been a

different ending."

"Shit." Tasuki swore softly, staring at the young acrobat in consternation. "Noone asked her to put her life in danger over me!"

"No, but then, I suppose it came naturally to her." Chichiri shrugged. "People protect those they love, after all."

Tasuki bit his lip, slowly shaking his head.

"I don't understand women." he said at length. "I ain't done a damn thing to make her feel like that. I've pushed her away, more'n anything. Why is she so persistant? I don't get it — I really don't."

Chichiri laughed.

"You should just be happy someone loves you enough to want to help you live." He said wisely. "And not be afraid of it, either. Last night, she made it clear that even if you didn't love her, she'd still do everything she could to help save your life. She's resolved her feelings and she knows where she stands, now. Noone's asked anything of you — just be glad she's that fond of you. And be nicer to her, perhaps. That wouldn't hurt. But noone's asking you to marry her or anything like that."

"Shit, I should hope not!" Tasuki only just remembered to keep his voice down. "Yeesh, I can't handle this."

"You're not over what happened with Miaka yet, are you?" Chichiri sent him a piercing look, and Tasuki grimaced, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's past, right?" He said slowly. Chichiri spread his hands.

"I don't know." He said carefully. "*I* think it is. But I'm not sure *you* do. Listen, Tasuki. That demon fever — the byouma — it took you so hard because you still have doubts lurking inside of you. Things you might think you've resolved — or that you've pretended to yourself you don't need to bother with. But it would never have taken such a grip if they hadn't been there. I warned you about negative emotion before — that something in the atmosphere is already creating doubts and that you had to ward against it as best you can. But you're not the kind of person who should fall so easily under a byouma's spell. So whatever it is you're still hashing out inside of you, put it aside. If it is Miaka — stop torturing yourself and let it go. We all understand it wasn't your fault — and that everyone has weaknesses, even you. But you can't change the past. So learn to let it go, huh?"

Tasuki looked taken aback. Then he smiled ruefully, the tips of his

fanged teeth protruding over his lip as he digested Chichiri's words.

"It ain't so easy to do as say, but I take your point." he said finally. "And I know… I know that Miaka… well, that what happened was… not all me. Just part of it… must have been. And it's that bit I'm still wrestlin' with. The whole hatin' women thing — but… yet…"

He trailed off, shrugging his shoulders.

"Havin' Anzu around is complicated." He admitted slowly. "Because like Miaka, she's a girl. An' I'm startin' to realise more an' more that girls… aren't just my sisters or my Ma. That sounds screwed up, I know, but before I met Miaka I never really saw any woman as anythin' but jus' like Aidou an' the rest. Not even Reirei — I guess Reirei was like another sister, in her own kinda way. An' then, all that stuff happened… an' now I can't help but notice it. You know. That they're… not… like… men."

He reddened at the awkwardness of his last words, and Chichiri came to join him, ruffling his hair playfully as he sent him an amused look.

"It had to come to you eventually, you know?" He said lightly. "Nineteen makes you a late starter, but I'm sure you'll catch up."

"Don't tease me." Tasuki pushed the monk's hand away, but there was no real anger in his tone, and he offered his friend a sheepish smile. "I know. It's messed up. But it was easier before I realised it, that's all. Anzu's got damn pretty, since we last saw her — either that or I've woken up more than I thought. But she is, an' it doesn't help. I guess… I don't want to end up in the same situation with another girl."

"Do you think you will?" Chichiri asked seriously. "Don't be silly. That was Hikou's spell. Even if you had fallen for Miaka hard and fast, Tasuki-kun, you wouldn't have acted on it without that magic giving you the push. You and Tamahome are good friends. Miaka is someone you like and respect, like a member of your family. So stop thinking of it as something you did. Take it from someone who knows all about self-doubt and blame… sometimes, things happen, and you have to let go."

"I guess you know better'n me about those things." Tasuki admitted ruefully. "All right, I guess so. But Anzu…"

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know." He admitted finally. "Look, I'm goin' out to get some air, an' think things over. If Aidou comes back an' yells about

food, gimme a shout, huh? I jus' need some space an' to clear my head. It's still kind of clogged up, after last night."

He glanced at himself ruefully.

"An' a bath, if I can find somewhere I ain't likely to drown myself."

"All right." Chichiri agreed. "I'll do that. Just don't try bathing in the Shouryuu — believe me, with your swimming skills…"

He trailed off, and Tasuki snorted.

"I'd already figured that much." He said baldly. "I ain't totally stupid, you know."

"Matter of opinion." Chichiri's eye twinkled. "Don't go too far, huh? I don't want to have to hop all over the place looking for you."

"I won't." Tasuki assured him. "An' Chichiri?"

"Mm?"

"Thanks." Tasuki sent him a wolfish smile. "I'll think about it. What you said. I promise."

With that he pushed open the door, creeping carefully past the little chamber where his sister was preparing food, and then out into the open air.

"Anzu's in love with me, huh?" He muttered, dropping down at the water's edge. "To the point she's willin' to die for me? Yeesh… just like Reirei… shit, and I'm not going to let that same thing happen over again. What is it with girls an' melodramatics, anyway? Still…"

He frowned, trailing his fingers in the water.

"Still, if she did risk her life, an' she did help me last night, I… suppose I should be nicer to her." He admitted with a resigned sigh. "It's not that I don't want to be friends, either. She's not so bad, really, for a girl an' all. It's just the other thing, buttin' in on me all the time. I wish that I didn't look at her an' realise she's a woman. If she was just a random person, it would be fine. Even if she was an *ugly* girl, it might be okay. But she ain't. Dammit, she ain't. She's pretty. An'…an' I can't switch that off. Maybe Chichiri's right, but even so… I don't need any of this."

He rubbed his temples.

"An' I'm thinking way too much for someone who just got over a raging fever." He acknowledged out loud. "Forget about it, Genrou. Jus' be glad you're alive and worry about whatever we're doing next

regarding the other Seishi. For now, being Tasuki an' saving Kounan is more important than some circus girl with a bandit fixation… that's the safest thing to do."

"Anzu?"

Back inside the derelict farm building, Chichiri gently shook the girl awake and her lashes twitched and fluttered open as she gazed up at him uncomprehendingly. The monk grinned, offering her a playful smile.

"It's morning." Was all he said, however. "Aidou's gone to see about breakfast… and then, I guess, we'll be moving on."

"Genrou!" Anzu's memory flooded back to her at this and she struggled up, turning to gaze down at the bed, frowning as she noted that it was empty.

"He's up?" She asked softly. Chichiri nodded.

"He's outside." He agreed. "He seems all right, this morning. Maybe still a little tired — well, that goes for us both. But considering… I think you probably helped save his life, Anzu. Whether he admits it or not."

"I don't care if he does or if he doesn't." Anzu's cheeks flushed faintly at this, and she got to her feet. "I love him, so I was glad to help."

"You're not uncertain about your feelings any more, then?" Chichiri arched an eyebrow, and Anzu shook her head.

"I believe in them, and things seem clearer." She agreed. "You were right. It makes sense now."

Chichiri's smile widened, but he did not make any further remark, and Anzu returned it with a shy one of her own. Carefully she pulled her tattered cloak around her, heading out into the sunshine as she scanned the land for any sign of the missing bandit. At first she couldn't see him, but then she spotted a figure lounging at the water's edge, idly skimming stones across its smooth, even surface. Her eyes lit up, and she hurried towards him, glad at this visible proof of his recovery.

"You don't have to come lookin' for me, you know." As she drew closer, he spoke without turning around, and she hesitated, then sat down on the grass beside him.

“You heard me coming?”

“You ain’t exactly stealthy. I coulda heard you a mile away.”

“Well, I’m not trying to be quiet… I’m not hiding from you or anything.” Anzu pulled her cloak more tightly around her shoulders. “You’re better this morning. Chichiri said you were… and I can see you are.”

“Mm.” Tasuki turned to face her now, a strange, reticent look in his bronzeish eyes. He held her gaze for a moment, then he smiled ruefully, the tips of fanged teeth protruding from his lip as he once more adopted the look of the predatory wolf. “I guess it takes more than a fever and a demon to kill a Reikaku-zan bandit.”

“Yeah, guess so.” Anzu agreed pensively. “So we can go on, now. Can’t we?”

“Wherever ‘on’ is.” Tasuki frowned. “We were looking for Mitsukake, but I don’t know if we can go back there in case he pulls another demon trick on one of us. Next time it mightn’t be someone as strong as me who gets burned by his backwards magic… and he’s no use to my father like that. Plus, we still haven’t managed to track down that moron Nuriko, either, and Chiriko seems to not even exist. So… I hope Chichiri has some ideas. I’m clean out. I just don’t know… what we do from here.”

Anzu eyed him in surprise, and he shrugged, offering another rueful smile.

“Guess I’m still tired.” He said flippantly. “That’s all.”

“Well, it was a long night for all of us.” Anzu admitted. “We were all worried about you. Even Aidou. Whether you believe it or not, she was crying last night, at one point. She really cares about her younger brother, underneath it all. You mightn’t know, but she does.”

“Hell, I don’t understand women.” Tasuki snorted. “I’ve survived this long without trying too hard, so I’m not going to bother about it too much now. I speak and Aidou hits me. That’s the general rule, so if you don’t mind, I’m keepin’ clear of her brand of sympathy until my head’s a little less like it’s been put through a drinkin’ contest with real raw ale.”

Despite herself, Anzu laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I suppose that’s fair.” She agreed. “Either way, I know she’s glad you’re all right.”

“Maybe.” Tasuki pursed his lips, and for a moment there was

silence between them. Then, at length, the bandit sighed.

“I told you, last night, didn’t I?” He said softly. Anzu looked startled.

“Pardon me?”

“About Miaka. I told you. I wasn’t myself — all kinds of shit was goin’ through my head. Chichiri said it was the nature of the demon, or somethin’…but I still think… I told you somethin’ I shouldn’t. About… Miaka.”

“Oh.” Anzu pinkened at the memory, and she nodded. “Yes. And I’m sorry. I know… talking about… that… it made your fever worse. I didn’t realise — I was slow — but Chichiri said that the demon fed on your negativity, and that… I should have realised sooner that it was the demon making you react that way. I should have had more faith in you then, Genrou — I’m sorry. But when you said those things to me, I just felt…”

She faltered, and Tasuki grimaced.

“I don’t remember much after that.” He admitted. ‘I know you said… somethin’. But I’m not clear on what, or on whatever it was you said to me after the demon was driven out. It’s a blur… maybe a dream. Hell, I can’t tell the difference. But I thought I’d said something… and I wanted to set it straight with you. Not that it matters if I do or not,’ He added hurriedly. “Because we ain’t… I mean, I ain’t interested in any woman. It’s just, I wanted… to clear things. So you understood.”

“It’s all right. I do understand.” Anzu said calmly, reaching down to pluck a flower from the riverbank as she toyed with it between her fingers. “You don’t have to tell me anything about it. Like you keep telling me, Genrou… I’m not your woman. You don’t owe me an explanation for anything. It’s fine.”

Tasuki was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then he smiled again.

“No, but we are… friends.” He said finally. “Even if you are a girl… last night you did somethin’ to help me out. From what Chichiri said, you put yourself right in danger, doin’ it, too. So… so you’re not as weak as I thought you were. And because of that, I want to be straight with you on things. Okay?”

“Okay.” Anzu’s eyes softened at this, and she nodded. “If that’s it, then sure. Go ahead. But I’m sure that it won’t change my opinion, whatever you say about the Priestess of Suzaku. And as for last

night… I told you that I was going to be a bandit, and be part of Reikaku-zan's gang ethic. Well, you're Kashira. What else would I do? You don't think Kouji would've done any less, do you?"

"Probably not." Tasuki agreed grudgingly.

"Well, then. You don't owe me anything."

"What exactly did I say to you, last night?" Tasuki asked carefully. "I mean, I remember — I think. Mostly. But… when things went hazy — I want to know what I said. I wasn't totally in my right mind, and I might've… confused myself."

Anzu's eyes became grave, and she frowned.

"I'm not sure it's all that important, in the light of day." She reflected. "We both said things last night that probably should be left alone right now, anyway. At least until we can resolve the problems that you and Chichiri are trying to get to the bottom of."

"Tell me." Tasuki was not to be dissuaded. "Or do I have to order you to, dammit? If you want to be a bandit, you gotta learn not to answer back to the kashira when he asks you a question — tell me, already!"

"All right." Anzu sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "You told me… that you tried to rape her. And that when Tamahome… when he came to rescue her, you tried to kill him. That's what you said last night, Genrou. Pretty much word for word."

Tasuki flinched, and for a moment, there was awkward silence between them. Then the bandit cursed.

"I wasn't ever gonna tell you about that." He admitted. "You or anyone, save Kouji."

"I didn't believe you, when you said it." Anzu admitted. "Because I *know* you — and that you're not that kind of person. You may hate girls — or *say* you do — but you go out of your way to rescue them, on occasion. Your family — your sisters — you'd defend them in a heartbeat, and we both know it. Reirei gave her life because she believed in you — and when I stopped and thought on it, whenever you tackle me about Reikaku-zan, it ain't just about hating women. You always mention her death — like you're trying to push me away from the mountain in case I wind up going the same way. Getting hurt, just like she did. You don't really hate women as much as you pretend — and I couldn't imagine you ever hurting a girl. You won't even fight a girl if she's trying to kill you. There's no way you'd assault someone you considered a friend… no way."

“It happened.” Tasuki spoke quietly. “Whether you want to believe it, or not.”

“Chichiri explained it to me.” Anzu admitted. “Because I was so… I didn’t like the way you’d said it. And then when the demon got worse inside of you, I understood that I’d made you feel all those things about it. That it had made you doubt yourself even more, and I hated myself for being so tactless.”

She looked rueful.

“You’re rubbing off on me.” She added. “It’s a worrying sign. But it’s all right, Genrou. I know that it happened, but I know that it wasn’t your fault. Chichiri explained everything — about the spell, and all of that. That you broke the enchantment by turning the tessen on yourself rather than betraying the people you cared about. He said that your strength of will was the thing that protected Miaka-sama, in the end. Not hurt her. That it was powerful, sly magic — and it took a lot to overcome. But you were able to. And you shouldn’t be ashamed of something that wasn’t your fault.”

Tasuki stared at her, momentarily robbed of speech, and she grinned.

“Chichiri knows a lot about magic.” She added unecessarily. “And I believe him when he says that, because he also knows you better than most people. Better than I do, I think, or at least I’m coming to realise it. When he told me… when he put it into context like that, I realised something important about you that I hadn’t fully realised before, I don’t think.”

“Do I want to hear this?”

“It’s nothing that bad.” Anzu grinned. “Just that there really isn’t anything you wouldn’t do for your friends. That’s all. Even die, if it required it. Even if turning the tessen on yourself was the only way out of the spell… you’d still do it, rather than hurt a friend.”

Despite himself, colour rose in Tasuki’s cheeks and he pushed her away, getting to his feet.

“Now you’re talking stupid stuff, and you’re making my head ache more.” He said bluntly. “Chichiri said we’d be moving, huh? We shouldn’t be sitting around here doing nothing, if that;s the case. If he has a hunch, we’d better…”

Whatever else he was going to say was cut off in mid sentence, however, as Anzu kissed him, taking him off guard completely by the sudden and impulsive nature of her action. To begin with he was too

startled to react, then, as he registered what she was doing, he pushed her back, glaring at her in discomfitted indignation.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Kissing you.” Anzu said calmly. “I told you last night, Genrou. I have no doubts any more. If you do, they’re yours to deal with. I can wait for you to get over them — or your issues where what happened to Miaka is concerned. But last night, after hearing Chichiri talk — and after having seen you fight that demon — I knew one hundred percent that I’m going to stay with you from now on. Whether you want me or you don’t, it’s tough. That’s what I’m going to do. I’ll prove myself to you eventually — whether as a bandit or as a woman. I don’t care which. But I’ll be here, and you can count on that. No matter what.”

“You’re an idiot.” Tasuki turned his back on her, but the sound of her laughter made him pause. “Hell, now what’s so funny?”

“You.” Anzu said, amused. “Your cheeks are clashing with your hair.”

“Anzu!” Tasuki wheeled round, glaring at her, and Anzu shook her head, her heart suddenly lighter than it had been since she had left Sairou.

“You wanted to speak to Chichiri.” She said evenly. “Am I distracting you?”

“Oh, shut up.” Tasuki grimaced at her, as he regained his colour. “I don’t have time for this. We have too much to do. Stop being a girl for a moment and start being a bandit, huh? If you’re so tough, then prove it and make yourself useful.”

With that he was gone, and Anzu dropped back against the trunk of a nearby tree, a smile touching her lips.

“He called me a bandit.” She realised. “Does that mean… he finally… sees me as being someone who could stay on Reikaku-zan?”

She reached up to touch her long dark hair, loosening the ribbon that held it in place, and glancing at it for a moment. Then she reached back to pull the sleek locks into more of a warrior’s queue, binding the hair back in the same way she had seen Hotohori manage his own long mane. Stray wisps still framed her face, and she brushed them back with a frown, unlooping the sash from her clothing and using her teeth to tear it down the middle, as she wound one half of the fabric around her brow in a makeshift headband. She knotted it firmly behind her head, moving to the glittering water’s edge to

examine her reflection.

A young woman stared back at her, but it was not the same circus performer who had left Sairou. Instead, as she touched her cheek absently, she realised that something inside of her had changed.

“I look more like a bandit, but it’s something more than just tying my hair back this way.” She murmured. “It’s something in my heart. Something about being strong enough to help Genrou heal. Do you see me, Reirei? Oneechan? I don’t have any doubts any more. I’m going to make sure I get to go back to the mountain — that he won’t want to leave me behind. He and I, we’ll be all right, and I’ll keep my promise, Reirei. I’m finally going to learn to be the kind of bandit you were, and I swear, I won’t let him go so easily. Not now — now I know how strong I can be. Noone is going to hurt me again — I’m not going to be a victim of anyone, whether at Reikaku-zan, or anywhere else. I’m going to be the best bandit I can be, and I’ll show Genrou that he wants me by his side. I won’t ever, ever give up on proving myself to him — I swear! Keep watching me, both of you — I promise, I won’t let you down!”

Chapter 19

Chapter Eighteen

The Jouzen academic archive was quiet that morning, and fairly empty, with only a few scholars going about their business in the serious, focused way of true academics. There was little communication or acknowledgement between those browsing the wealth of scrolls that the old stone building kept in its storage chambers, and nobody paid any attention to the small figure that sat huddled in the furthest corner of the most secluded study chamber, surrounded by parchment and ink as he struggled to fix his mind on the task in front of him.

To anyone passing, it would seem that a family had somehow managed to lose track of one of their children, for the boy was small even for his age, and with his long hair falling loose around his face, he could almost be mistaken for a young girl who might have wandered in off the street. However, a second glance would have revealed that this was no ordinary child, and the scrolls and books that littered the desk in front of him were composed of some of the most complicated Chinese characters that many adults would spend years attempting to decipher.

The young boy — for even despite his short stature he was still only thirteen years old — spread the oldest scroll out in front of him on the table, poring over it with intense concentration as he ran his gaze from top to bottom and right to left, absorbing the complex scribblings of his antecedents as he strove to fully understand. Lost in his own world, occasionally odd words would escape his lips, but noone came to disturb him, and he did not know how many hours had passed since he had come to be in the old library building.

For one such as he, ageless and timeless, with no place to go and no need to break for food or sleep, time merged into one continuous flow and he paid no attention to the rising or falling sun or the glimmering midnight moon.

“No. Not this one. Not this one after all.” He murmured, biting his lip as he pushed the scroll aside. “And I was so sure it was… but that doesn’t… it’s not… oh, this is frustrating. It’s so frustrating! Why can’t I find the thing I’m looking for! It must be here… I know it must!”

As he sat back to consider his next move, something flickered and

danced at the back of his mind and he tensed, clenching his small fists as he fought to bring it back under some semblance of control.

"Go away." He hissed, a mixture of determination and resolution in his green eyes as he focused his thoughts on suppressing the whispers and echoes that taunted his young senses. "You're not there. You're not really there! Leave me alone! I have to find… I have to find the right one."

The whispers grew stronger and the boy got to his feet, pacing restlessly across the small, secluded alcove as inside of his young mind, a battle raged. The hiss of another voice, dark and sinister as it sought to take hold of his senses made fear grip his young heart, but he set his teeth, his brow creasing in concentration as he forced it down into the recesses of his brain.

"You're not really there." He whispered. "I know you're not. I know you're not there, so I won't listen to you! It's all because of the stars… it's all just a delusion! You're just in my head, Miboshi — you're not there and you can't hurt me. I have work to do — and I can't waste any time!"

As he spoke, he felt a surge of strength well up inside of him, and as he glanced down, he saw the glimmer of something red peeking out beneath the heavy folds of his clothing. Relief touched his heart as he registered the faint, yet distinct red outline of a chinese character — and as he stared at it, he felt the doubts and insecurities drift away.

"*I am Chiriko*." He murmured. "And I'm *not* going to give in to this. I know the answer is here somewhere — I know I've read it before! I need to find it — I need to get to the bottom of this. Kounan — this whole world — I need to be strong. I won't let the delusions win. I won't let them!"

With this resolve fresh in his young heart, he turned his attention back to the shelf of old books, fingering each of them hesitantly until he came to one at the very furthest end. A gasp escaped his lips as he drew it from its hiding place, running his gaze over it and then nodding his head.

"Maybe…" He murmured. "It's worth a try. Either way, it's all I can do for now. I need the others if I'm going to be able to do anything else. I still don't know if I'm strong enough to reach them, not in this state, and with everything so out of sync. But if I can at least find the reason — if I can get to the bottom of it… perhaps then I'll be able to use what strength I *do* have to find my friends and bring this whole situation to a conclusion."

He faltered, dropping the book onto the table as the whispers started in the back of his mind once more, and he gripped the edge of the rough wooden unit, his hair falling loose and wild around his face as he did so. He closed his eyes, knowing without looking that the red 'extended net' that had adorned his upper foot had once more disappeared from view.

"But I *told* you, I know you're not real and you're *not* going to win." He muttered darkly. "You didn't win the last time, Miboshi, and you won't win this. You're *not* inside of me— not any more. I won't be fooled — it's all because of the stars, of the imbalance of this world. You're not really there and I have nothing that I should fear — so I'm not going to let you distract me from what I need to do! I am Chiriko of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi — and I *am* going to get to the bottom of this, no matter what!"

"So the general decision is that we're not going back to Choukou? Or that we are?"

Anzu cast a glance between the three huddled Suzaku Seishi, a questioning look on her young face as she observed the seriousness of their expressions. "You all look so grim — do you think it's going to be as bad as that, trying to help this Mitsukake?"

"That's what we're trying to decide." Hotohori said heavily. "I'm not happy about the idea of Tasuki going back there, not after last night. And even Chichiri isn't at full strength, whatever he claims. Yet we can't leave him to himself… and we certainly can't take the two of you into danger again. It leaves us with an unpleasant dilemma… one we're not quite sure how to resolve."

"I think he's left Choukou." Chichiri added, crossing his legs as he leant up against the trunk of a tree. "My powers *have* recovered somewhat, but even so, the signal is intermittant. I'm pretty sure he's not in the same area — that he's moved, and in this rough direction. However…"

"However that means we can't leave the two o' you here while we go hunting for him." Tasuki said frankly. "In case he sleepwalks in on you or somethin' and causes a massacre."

"Anzu and I will be all right." Aidou said quietly, folding her arms across her chest. "But whatever that thing was that attacked you, Shun'u, it could be someone else's turn next. Something needs to be done about him — whatever that something is. It could be a child, an old man, anyone could fall under the byouma's spell the next time.

You can't really leave him to wander aimlessly around the countryside — can you?"

"No, we can't." Chichiri admitted heavily. "And since we don't know what state he's in, nowhere is quite safe. We're probably better off not worrying about it and just trying to track his movements. With any luck I've enough of a spell inside of me to do something to at least break through his dazed state — like I did with Hotohori-sama. It's the best plan we have… as you said, Aidou, we can't just let him roam."

"Then we're leaving here." Anzu said softly, her gaze resting briefly on Tasuki as she did so. "And if you are, Aidou and I… we should come too."

"It might be risky." Hotohori warned, and Aidou spread her hands.

"We survived last night, and the byouma was right here among us." She said, her expression unusually grave as she glanced at her brother, then back at the former Emperor. "Anzu and I might be women, but we're neither of us weak, you know. And she's right — we shouldn't split up unless there's really no choice in the matter. We're safer all together… just like I said before."

"The last signal I picked up for him was in a town about two miles north of here." Chichiri got to his feet, scooping up his *shakujou* and glancing at it momentarily. "I may have enough to take us there the quick way, you know — if you're not worried about a bumpy landing."

"With you, that's pretty much normal." Tasuki said frankly. "And it's as good a place as any, to start with. I wanna find him, Chichiri. Even if he did sic that thing on me — he wasn't himself. And I hate that… he needs our help an' we need to find him. We're ready when you are."

"All right." Chichiri nodded. "Then let's go."

"Are you sure?" Aidou eyed the monk doubtfully. "You were fit to drop last night — Shun'u, he gave you all of his energy just to drive this demon out. Should we be putting such a strain on his magic again so soon after that?"

"I'm pretty resiliant, you know." Chichiri grinned, shaking his *shakujou* as if to emphasise his point. He picked his *kasa* up from the ground, running his hand over it, then nodding.

"It's close enough, and I know this area, so it's not so very hard to focus on." He added. "Just everyone hang on — it might be a bumpy ride but I'll do my best."

No sooner had the words left his mouth but they found themselves drawn up into the odd bamboo hat, and within moments they were standing on the outskirts of another northern city — so like Choukou in its general construction but yet so different in its bright, cheerful ambience. Despite Chichiri's anxieties about the landing, they had set down with relatively little trouble, and the monk let out a sigh of relief, slipping the *kasa* onto his head as they made their way into the city itself.

"It's been a while since I've been here, you know." he reflected. "It's sort of nostalgic. My Father worked as an official in this city — though we lived outside of it, because my mother preferred not to be surrounded by all the bustle. When I was a boy, my sister and I used to walk here from the village quite often."

"So this really is home country for you, then." Anzu cast him a smile, and Chichiri nodded.

"I haven't heard you talk about a sister before."

"She died when the river flooded." Chichiri said simply. "So there's not really much to say."

"I'm sorry… that was tactless of me, wasnt it?" Anzu flushed, and Chichiri shot her a playful grin.

"It's all right." He said lightly. "You've just been spending too much time with Tasuki and you're starting to adopt his bad habits, that's all. You should watch that, you know."

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" Tasuki demanded indignantly. "What kind of bad habits — Chichiri!"

"The kind which leads to you blurting out the first thing that comes into your mind, probably." Aidou said evenly. "Shut up, Shun'u… aren't we here for another reason than to talk about your character flaws?"

"You know, you could be a little nicer to me, considering I almost died last night." Tasuki glowered at his older sister, who sent him a pointed smile in return.

"And *you* could be nicer to Anzu, considering that she helped save your life." She admonished.

"What do you mean, nicer? What not nice thing have I done to Anzu this morning, huh?" Tasuki protested. "I haven't done anything — Anzu, tell her, will you?"

"Well, you *did* kiss her. I suppose that might count, depending on

your perspective." Chichiri interjected absently, before the young circus performer could respond, and Tasuki bristled, his cheeks reddening as he realised the monk had probably overheard a good deal of their early morning conversation.

"*I did not!* She kissed me, and besides…"

He faltered, realising what he had blurted out, and he sent Aidou a wary glance, holding up his hands as if afraid she might strike him.

"No, that's not what I mean… It's just… I'm not…"

"Oh, shut up, you stupid boy." Aidou sighed, tutting under her breath as she cast him a disparaging look. "If you think I haven't noticed how you and she are, then you're really more of an idiot than I took you for."

"What do you mean, how we are?" Tasuki looked befuddled, as Anzu's cheeks flushed an embarrassed pink at Aidou's words. "Oneechan, what are you babbling about now?"

"If you don't know, then you really are a fool." Was Aidou's response, however. "But it's like I said — start acting like a man and take responsibility for it a little, all right?"

"Will someone tell me what the hell she's talking about?!" Tasuki let out an exclamation, frustration in his expression, and Hotohori laughed.

"Anzu, you have my sincerest sympathies." He said ironically, and despite herself, Anzu smiled.

"It's not like that." She said slowly. "I mean… well, it really isn't. Genrou… hasn't… and… well, it's just not. But it's all right… I… I can live with that. I mean, if it never is… it'll be okay."

"Are you even still speaking the same language as me?" Tasuki stared at her in bewilderment. "What haven't I? What isn't? What can you live with… dammit, Anzu… what's *wrong* with everyone today?"

Aidou shot her brother a speculative look, shaking her head.

"If it wasn't for the fact you were so sick yesterday, I'd whack you over the head till you saw some sense." She said frankly. "But if you're any kind of man, you won't just stand there an' let the girl wait for you to pull yourself together. You've got a good woman here, Shun'u — more than you deserve to have, and Suzaku only knows how you've managed it. Stop being an idiot and face up to it… it's about time you stopped being a reckless little boy and took some responsibility for yourself."

It was impossible for Tasuki to go any redder, and he stared at his sister in abject horror, struck speechless as at last he understood the meaning behind her words.

Chichiri chuckled, offering Anzu a conspiratorial smile.

“I believe you have my sympathies too, Anzu-chan.” He said serenely. “Good luck, you know.”

“Will everyone stop talking like they’ve all lost the plot!” Tasuki exploded at this. “We’re here to look for Mitsukake! And Anzu might have helped save my life last night — I’m grateful, okay? But yeesh, noone ever said there was anything else involved in it than that! Anzu’s my friend — that’s all! And yes, maybe she’s proved to me that she’s stronger than I thought — that she might even be able to hack it, on Reikaku-zan. But nobody has said anything about anything other than that! One more word and I’m gettin’ my tessen out — so shut your faces, all right?”

For a moment there was silence, as several of the nearby townsfolk paused in their daily routines to stare at the strange, redhaired man who had suddenly started shouting in the middle of their usually calm streets. Anzu pinkened, then shook her head, hesitating before reaching out to touch the discomfitted bandit on the arm.

“I haven’t asked you for anything.” She reminded him. “But I do want to be a bandit, and I do want you to accept me for that. So if you have… that’s all right. Chichiri and the others are only teasing you — don’t let them wind you up. I didn’t help you last night because I wanted you to fall in love with me, or anything like that. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. And you saying we’re friends — that’s fine with me. Okay?”

“At least someone speaks some sense.” Tasuki muttered, somewhat placated by the girl’s gentle speech. “All right, already. So now that’s settled, maybe we can look for Mitsukake already?”

And with that he stalked off ahead of them down the street, the tension in his gait giving away the fact he was still highly ruffled and indignant by his companions’ innuendoes.

“He’s going to be the last one to realise it, I think.” Chichiri was the one who broke the silence, and Anzu shot him a troubled look.

“You shouldn’t say things like that to him — any of you.” She reproached. “He isn’t in love with me — he’s still in love with… he… he still doesn’t want to make that kind of a move. And he doesn’t like women, so I don’t want to push him to feel for me what I feel for him.

It's really all right — I can live with us just being friends, if that's all we're going to be. But you shouldn't tease him — it *was* me who kissed him this morning. Not the other way around."

"Tasuki's heart is a complicated place, it seems." Hotohori reflected, and Chichiri grinned.

"Well, if it is, it's the only part of him that is." He said, amused. "It's all right, Anzu. Really, I think Tasuki feels a lot more than he's letting you or anyone else believe, right at the moment. After all, you did give him your strength last night… but it was you telling him you loved him that brought him out of his coma. He's not as indifferent as he thinks he is — but being Tasuki, it'll take a while before the message sinks in."

Anzu stared at him, and Chichiri shrugged.

"I'm pretty sure, you know." He said flippantly. "Love's a difficult thing for him to get his head around — but I think it's that way. Otherwise, I'm not sure you'd have reached him… he just doesn't know it yet."

"That's because he can't eat it, burn it or fight it." Aidou said drolly. "Anzu-chan, if you really have your heart set on taming my brother, you're in for the long haul."

Anzu flushed, but her eyes sparkled as she contemplated Chichiri's words.

"If that is true, then I definitely have a reason to stick with him." She said softly. "But I want to, anyway. Whether just as a Reikaku-zan bandit or something else… I've decided and I'm not going to change my mind. But if he did love me… even a little bit… I'd be so happy. I don't know why I'm so drawn to him… I just know that I am, and that's where I want to be."

"I think you impressed all of us last night." Hotohori said evenly. "You have the inner strength to wield a sword, if you can fight a demon with your raw emotions. If you can channel that into how you hold a blade, Anzu, you'll find it comes naturally to you. It's all a matter of spirit, anyway. And you obviously have plenty of that."

"We probably shouldn't let him get too far ahead of us, you know." Chichiri glanced ahead of them, gesturing towards the figure of the bandit as he disappeared into the crowd. "Even despite his experiences last night, I'm not sure what he might do if he runs into Mitsukake. I'm hoping he'll have the sense to stay well back this time — but to tell you the truth, I think he might not. His heart rules his

head where his friends are concerned — and I don't want to fight another byouma if I can possibly help it."

"I'll go bring him back." Anzu volunteered. "I won't let him get into any trouble, don't worry."

Before Chichiri or anyone could stop her, she was gone after him, her heart skipping a beat in her chest as she replayed the monk's words in her head.

"Could Genrou really… feel like that?" She wondered. "Or is he… still in love with Miaka? Was he ever in love with her? I wish I knew, but I daren't bring the subject up. After this morning's conversation — whether he did or he didn't love her, the whole episode hurt him and I hurt him too by flinging it up in his face last night. So I… I guess I'll just let it lie, for now. Still, Chichiri's smart — and perceptive. And if Aidou and Hotohori think so too…"

She trailed off as she reached the street corner, stopping dead as she caught sight of her target across the other side of the square. However, it was not Tasuki that caught her eye so much as the dark-eyed elegant young woman who had suddenly and inexplicably attached herself to his body, her arms draped around him as she spoke to him in excited, animated tones. Anzu could not hear the conversation from where she was standing, but as she watched, horror and uncertainty flared in her heart as she registered the fact that Tasuki had not pushed the female away.

"He doesn't like women, so what's *her* story?" She murmured, swallowing hard as she sought to keep a hold on her emotions. "Was he lying to me all the time? Is this… someone I should know about?"

A peal of laughter penetrated the city square, and Anzu's brow creased as she absorbed the woman's appearance — her fair complexion, with sparkling eyes full of life and mischief set above a cheeky, delicate nose and a well-formed mouth that was twitched into an amused, playful smile. She was dressed in fine, pastel shades that accentuated her appearance of elegance and beauty, and despite her convictions, Anzu felt a pang of envy stab through her young heart.

"Who is she?" She whispered. "And why… why is Genrou… why is he letting her hug him like that!"

"Anzu?"

Chichiri's voice from behind her startled her and she turned, casting the monk a troubled look as tears glittered on her lashes. Chichiri sent her a bemused look, and Anzu swallowed again,

struggling to hold back her emotions.

“I… I found him.” She said softly, her voice slightly unsteady as she took in the two figures across the square once more. “Chi… Chichiri… who is that woman? Why is she all over him? I thought he hated women, and you just said… but… who is she?”

“Woman?” Chichiri followed her gaze, and his good eye widened with first disbelief, then amusement. He grinned, cocking his head on one side as he looked at her.

“Oh, Anzu… there’s no need to start crying.” He said gently. “Stop it, you know? It’s all right. You’ve nothing to worry about.”

“I know… I said… I said it was all right if he didn’t…” Anzu faltered. “And it sounds petty and jealous, but I didn’t… I don’t…”

She faltered, and Chichiri sighed, shaking his head.

“Don’t you have faith in your feelings?” He asked softly. Slowly Anzu nodded.

“Yes, but…”

“Stop it.” Chichiri put a finger to her lips. “It’s not what you think. Come with me — you’ll see what I mean.”

“Come with…?” Anzu shook her head, pulling away from him. “No! I can’t… that woman…”

“That’s not a woman, you know.” Chichiri said candidly, taking her by the arm and leading her across the square. “You’re jumping to conclusions — take a deep breath and pull yourself together. I told you. It’s all right.”

“Not a…” Anzu gazed at the monk as if he was mad, but before she could ask any further questions, the strange female seemed to catch sight of them, letting out an exclamation as she released her grip on the bandit, hurrying acoss the cobbles towards them.

“Chichiri!” She exclaimed, her voice melodious and sweet, and Anzu stared at her miserably, not comprehending what Chichiri had been trying to tell her. The monk, however, seemed to be quite unperturbed by the sudden appearance of this willowy figure, laughing as he held out his hands to greet her.

“Well, and you’re not who I expected to see here.” He said lightly. “But you’ll do, I suppose.”

“Is that any way to greet an old friend?” The woman pouted. “I had no idea you or Tasuki were quite as close as this. We were going to set

out to look for you, but I happened to see a flash of red hair and I knew who it belonged to. So my hunch was right and you are together — and more than a little bit alive, which makes me glad. Last night you were sending life signals out wide enough that I'm sure you could pick them up in Kutou… we were worried something was badly wrong."

"We?" Chichiri asked curiously, and the woman nodded.

"Mitsukake's with me. Or rather, he's not right this second, but I rather stumbled upon him yesterday." She said with a grin. "He's back at the inn helping a friend of mine to hire us horses — like I said, we were going to set out looking for you, and it seemed the easiest option."

Her eyes flitted to Chichiri's desolate companion, and her smile widened.

"Who's this?" She asked curiously. "A new friend? I don't think we've met — I'm sure I'd remember such a pretty face."

"This is Anzu." Chichiri grinned. "She's a friend of both Tasuki and mine, and she's been helping us on our search."

He patted the young girl on the arm, offering her a smile.

"Anzu, this is Nuriko — one of the other Suzaku Shichi Seishi. We've been looking for him for a while, you might remember… tracking his life force was the reason we left Reikaku-zan in the first place."

"N… N… Nuriko?" Anzu's jaw dropped, as she stared at the woman as if seeing her for the first time. "*H… him*?"

Nuriko chuckled, taking in her stunned appearance with an amused grin.

"Pleased to meet you, Anzu-san." he said lightly. "I guess I'm not quite what you expected to find, huh?"

Anzu merely stared at him, lost for words, and Chichiri grinned.

"I'd forgotten quite how much like a girl you can look when you put your mind to it." He admitted. "It's so normal for Tasuki and I now — knowing how you are — that I guess it doesn't have much of a shock factor for us any more. But you might want to lay off on the flirting, Nuriko-kun. Even if you're playing around, and we know that you are — you're confusing Anzu and making her a little jealous — if you know what I mean."

“Jealous?” Nuriko stared, then comprehension dawned in his clever dark eyes. “Ah… I see. So Tasuki’s gone and got himself a girlfriend, has he? Well, that’s brave — you must like a challenge, Anzu-chan, that’s all I can say about that.”

He winked, scooping up the startled Anzu’s hand and offering her a conspiratorial smile.

“I’m sorry if you got the wrong idea. Tasuki and I are old friends, but there’s nothing else to it than that.” He said softly. “It’s just been a long time since I’ve been able to hug anyone, so I got a little carried away. But my heart belongs to another, and besides, mountain wolves are really not my type. I’m more interested in men who are more refined and who don’t blurt out the first stupid thing that comes into their heads.”

“Speaking of which, Hotohori-sama *is* with us.” Chichiri said matter-of-factly. “I came after Anzu to make sure she didn’t get herself into trouble looking for Tasuki — but he and Tasuki’s sister are waiting by the centre of the market. You said Mitsukake was with you — from that, am I to guess he’s… all right?”

“Can’t you sense him?” Nuriko looked surprised, and Chichiri frowned, shaking his head.

“No.” He admitted. “My magic’s a bit short this morning… it’s a long story.”

“The byouma.” Nuriko’s expression clouded, and Chichiri nodded, as the red-haired bandit saunted over to join them, after having spent the last few minutes negotiating with a tricky stall-keeper over the price of a butaman.

“Yes… how did you…?”

“When I ran into him, Mitsukake was pretty dazed and confused. He did remember seeing Tasuki, though, and he was convinced he’d hurt him.” Nuriko frowned. “He was all in, basically… but he seemed to recover more and more. I think whatever happened when he and Tasuki met helped to bring his thoughts back in line — but he was so worried. And so was I, after he explained it coherently. That his magic could have got so out of control… but then everything is messed up at the moment, isn’t it? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Well, we had a little chat with the demon, and convinced it to go away.” Chichiri said lightly, sending Anzu a rueful look. “But I won’t pretend it was an easy thing to do — I’d rather not have a repeat. You’re right, Nuriko — things are messed up. But right now, how to

fix it — I really don't know."

"Hotohori-sama burnt down my village thinking he was fighting Nakago." Tasuki swallowed his mouthful, adding his bit to the conversation. "Mitsukake gave me a fever. I was half expectin' to find *you* wieldin' rocks at my head — talk about getting a complex!"

"You seem all right." Chichiri added, eying Nuriko keenly. "I'm glad, if a little surprised."

"I wasn't, when I first came around and found myself in the middle of Yukigase." Nuriko admitted. "But I think everything is clear for me now. I feel… well, as good as a dead girl can feel, considering she's been buried in Hokkan snow for just about two years or more."

"But you… you're really *not* a… a girl?" Anzu found her tongue at this, staring up at Nuriko uncertainly, and Tasuki snorted, almost spitting food everywhere as he did so.

"Tasuki-chan, that's revolting." Nuriko scolded. "And in front of Anzu, too — you really don't have any shame, do you?"

"Don't *you* start with that." Tasuki glowered at his friend, then cast Anzu a grin.

"Nuriko's just weird. He likes wearing skirts — his brain's kinked that way." He said frankly. "You get used to it."

"I'll give you a kinked brain." Nuriko flexed his fingers, and Tasuki shook his head.

"Uh-uh. I jus' got over a fever, so leave me alone." He said frankly. "You save your strength for punching out real villains, and let me finish my breakfast in peace."

"Second breakfast." Chichiri remarked, and Tasuki shrugged.

"I told you I was hungry." He defended himself. "And it's *my* coin — unlike some monks who pinch it from unsuspecting bandits, I earned the right to spend it."

"By pinching it from unsuspecting merchants, no doubt." Amusement glimmered in Nuriko's dark eyes. "Oh, but this is good. If you're here, then we don't have to go searching for you. If you're all right, both of you, Mitsukake will stop worrying that he's about killed two of his friends. And I don't think he's any risk to anyone now. If nothing else, he's bound up his hand and he refuses to touch anyone — but if he sees you're all right, I'm sure he'll recover himself even more quickly. Seems your little encounter in Choukou was what woke him up, Tasuki-chan — last night he really was sounding much more

like the Myou Juan we know and love."

"Then if Mitsukake is with you, and Hotohori is not far behind us, we've pretty much killed two birds with one stone." Chichiri reflected. "Which just leaves us with Chiriko to track down… although I think that will have to wait until my magic has fully recovered itself. It took more of my energy than I thought to transmit us from the riverside to here… I suppose last night took more out of me than I anticipated."

"Then get Hotohori-sama and whoever it was you said was with him, and come back to the inn. It's the third one, on the end of the next street." Nuriko suggested. "I'll go back, tell Tamatama and Mitsukake to hold it on the horses. And then we'll see what we can do, between us. If there's just Chiriko, we must be able to work out some way of tracking the kid down."

"And then we'll just have to hope that the six of us can do something to repair what's wrong with our world." Chichiri said frankly. "Before things become more unstable than they already are!"

Chapter 20

Chapter Nineteen

"Well, this is a merry little get-together."

As they sat around the table in the downstairs chamber of the inn, Nuriko cast his companions a playful smile, resting his chin in his hands as he gazed around at each of them. "I almost feel like I'm attending a Seishi reunion — you know, we really should do this more often."

"Kinda difficult, when half o' you folks are dead." Tasuki said bluntly, shaking his head. "I ain't digging up any rottin' corpses for anyone, thanks very much — Suzaku only knows what *you* look like, after two years or more under mountain snow — I think I'll pass."

"You're so mean." Nuriko pouted. "My spirit is beautiful, Tasuki-kun — isn't that what counts?"

"Sure, so long as you don't mind the fact worms are probably eating the rest of you as we speak." Tasuki said frankly.

"Will the two of you stop talking about death and decomposition as if it's the most natural subject in the world?" Hotohori interjected at this, his expression slightly sickly as he glared at them. "We are at the table, and it is not appropriate to discuss the decay of your friends' physical forms in front of them."

"We're not eating." Tasuki objected. "Quit being squeamish — I was only stating a fact."

"This does feel sort of nostalgic, you know." At the banter, Chichiri laughed, casting the bewildered Anzu and the doubtful Aidou an amiable grin. "It's almost a shame that, when we do find Chiriko, it will probably mean times like this are at an end."

"Yeah, I reasoned that out too." Nuriko nodded, his expression becoming serious for a moment. "This is our final fling, isn't it? We're here, but we're not — Hotohori-sama, Mitsukake and I. And Chiriko, wherever he is. We're not really real… this is just temporary."

"Well, I didn't think that by taking K… Nuriko to Eiyou I'd wind up in the company of Suzaku Seishi or the living dead." Tamatama sat back in his seat, looking pensive. "No wonder my father was so worried about me leaving Yukigase. All this time I thought he was

worried about someone taking advantage of my delicate physical state — but now I see it's because you never know who you might meet on a random journey across Kounan."

"Delicate *mental* state is more like it." Tasuki snorted. "I should have guessed Nuriko's buddies were as brain-kinked as he is."

"Tasuki, shut up, will you?" Nuriko cast him a glare, but Tamatama laughed.

"No, I like your friend. He says it how it is." He said contemplatively. "This really is turning into quite the trip — going back to the borderlands will seem dull and tame compared to this."

"So what are we going to do now?" Mitsukake asked softly, resting his still-bound hand gingerly on the table as he cast his comrades a quizzical glance. "Do we return to Eiyou, and see if Chiriko has been drawn there?"

"He's just a kid so he probably hasn't gone far." Tasuki reflected. "But Eiyou's a long way away from here, isn't it? And Chichiri's hat is still broken."

"It's not the hat, it's *me* that's broken." Chichiri sighed, spreading his hands in resignation. "My magic is still recovering from our antics last night, that's all. I'm sorry, you know? I'm doing my best — but right now the only one of you I can sense properly is Tasuki."

"Maybe that has something to do with our undead state." Mitsukake glanced at his left hand, then back at the monk, guilt flickering in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I feel that it's my fault."

"It's all right." Tasuki cast him a rueful grin. "Weren't you the one who told me I couldn't die all that easily? I was jus' provin' it, that's all. You caught me off guard, but it was okay in the end. Takes more than a stinking demon to kill Reikaku-zan's Kashira. I'm fine."

"And besides, none of us were quite ourselves when we came to be recreated." Hotohori said softly. "Tasuki is right, you know. This isn't your fault… this is something beyond our ken. Something that's guided and dictated our rebirth."

"I wonder if Chiriko is okay." Tasuki looked uncharacteristically concerned, and Anzu shot him a questioning glance.

"Do you think he's causing problems for people, too?" She asked hesitantly. Tasuki shrugged.

"Depends. He *is* a kid." He said bluntly. "He might cry and scream at them and stamp his foot, or stare at them as if he hasn't a clue what

they're talking about. Other than that? Couldn't tell ya. But in terms of Suzaku's mark, he's the weakest of us all. Suzaku caught him kinda early, after all — he wasn't grown like the rest of us."

"It's a matter of opinion as to whether *you've* grown up even now, Tasuki-chan." Nuriko said playfully, and Tasuki pulled a face in his direction.

"Shut up."

"Chiriko… is a *child*?" Anzu's eyes opened wide with dismay. "Are you saying… Suzaku… chose a *child* to fight his battles?"

"Chiriko was thirteen when Miaka came to Kounan." Chichiri nodded. Anzu bit her lip.

"But…" She faltered, then shook her head.

"And he died?" She whispered. "A boy of thirteen fought and died… to save Kounan?"

"You didn't know that, huh?" Nuriko eyed her keenly. "Yes."

"But that isn't… it shouldn't… he…"

"War affects all people, Anzu-chan. Old and young alike, you know." Chichiri said quietly. "And Chiriko is… was very young, in some ways. But… not in others. Tasuki's right when he says that Chiriko's Suzaku power was weaker… but then again, maybe his will was stronger, in the end. He might have been young, but he was, undoubtedly, a genius. At least, when Suzaku's power ran through him — he was smarter than anyone in the whole of Kounan, of that I'm sure."

"When he died, he chose to take his own life." Tasuki added quietly, and Anzu could hear genuine emotion in the bandit's tones. "Because one o' the enemy was usin' him as a puppet — tryin' to kill Miaka and us by possessin' his body and using it to hurt us. So he stabbed himself… an' he wouldn't let Mitsukake help him. He was determined to die an' save us all…"

"Being a Suzaku warrior seems to be about nothing but tragedy and sacrifice." Aidou put in at that moment, as her brother faltered, unable to continue any further. "Maybe Ma was right all along — Suzaku's mark is a curse, not a blessing. Your lives in exchange for Kounan's peace — just as she always said."

"Maybe that's one way to see it." Chichiri looked pensive. "There has been a lot of sadness and death… but also a lot of friendship and joy. Bonds strong enough to pull people back from the grave, in a time

of need. Noone's truly dead so long as you remember them, you know? And it's bittersweet, losing people — but it's better to have had them and to have lived knowing them than it is to try and hide from them. I've no regrets about being a Seishi, at the end of the day. I've been willing to lay down my life before, for my friends and for Miaka and I'd do it again, if the need arose. Maybe that is because I'm Suzaku's sacrifice — but truly, I'm just glad that I've been given the chance to know why I was born. A lot of people never learn that, you know. We're some of the few who do — and I don't think that's a sad thing at all."

"Chichiri's right." Mitsukake inclined his head slightly. "Through the powers we've been given, we've all been able to make a difference."

"How many people can truly say that, I wonder?" Nuriko tilted his head on one side, considering. "Not many, I bet."

"That still doesn't help the family left behind while you go venturing on these suicide missions." Aidou said firmly. "No wonder Ma cried so much when Shun'u's mark first appeared on his arm. She's been expecting to see him buried for the last fifteen or sixteen years, since then. And if not even a child is safe…"

She trailed off, and Tasuki shot her a surprised look.

"Are you sick? You almost sound worried about me." He said, confused. "You didn't catch Mitsukake's byouma, did you?"

"Shut up." Aidou brought the flat of her hand down hard against her brother's skull, and Tasuki winced, edging away from her.

"No, you're definitely Aidou." He said frankly. "Yeesh, Nee-chan, that hurt! What happened to laying off me because I was sick last night?"

"You're well enough to shoot your mouth off, so you're fair game." Aidou said firmly.

"Aidou is right, though." Anzu said softly, casting Tasuki a sidelong glance. "It might be all right to make a decision based on your own life. But it must be hard for the families. I… If Genrou had died last night, I… I don't know what I would have done. Nuriko-san, when I was in Eiyou, I spoke to someone who knew you — she said that your family still missed you, even though they were proud of what you'd done… I guess… I can understand where Aidou is coming from. After all — there's nothing they can do but accept it, when the mark comes. But…"

She trailed off, and Nuriko looked grave. He nodded.

“I suppose so.” He agreed. “But there’s not a lot that we can do to change it. I mean, I have regrets. I think we all do — I think that’s proven by what was uppermost in our minds at the time we were flung back here. I know I didn’t make the most of my life as Ryuuen, and that that’s probably the reason I died when I did. I fulfilled my purpose, and that was that — I’ve come to feel that way, anyway. But if you’re worried about Tasuki, Anzu-chan, I wouldn’t be. He fought his demon last night and he came through it. He still has a reason and a drive to live — whatever it is, there’s something he’s meant to do — something he hasn’t completed or done yet. The same goes for Chichiri — I’m certain of it.”

“Now that is fatalistic thinking.” Tamatama said drolly, and Nuriko offered him a rueful smile.

“Yeah, I’m being morose again. Sorry about that.” He said lightly. “But I still think it’s true. That those of us who died… were meant to die. And Chichiri and Tasuki — you still have things to do or people to be. Stuff to achieve.”

“Like being Kashira at Reikaku-zan.” Tasuki reflected. “Guess that makes sense. The last boss died way prematurely — and I ain’t had a good shot of emulatin’ him yet… I can’t die before I’ve become a better leader than he was, that’s for sure.”

“Perhaps my purpose was to leave Kounan an heir in Boushin.” Hotohori looked thoughtful. “That even though I would die, my line would continue and protect my kingdom in the way I always sought to do.”

“You sound like you’re coming to terms with your death a little more, Heika.” Chichiri glanced at him, and Hotohori smiled.

“For the first time, perhaps.” He admitted. “I can’t see Boushin grow up, or be with Houki now. But… I did manage to bring Kounan to peace and stability, and it is in that name my spirit continues to fight. I left an heir, to rule in my stead. A continuation of my line and a bright future for this country. As Emperor — who can do more? We are, after all, just human.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t buy the fact that a thirteen year old boy was ‘meant to die’.” Aidou said bluntly. “No matter how you say it, it’s still a child’s life.”

“Chiriko’s family were very proud of him and the sacrifices he made for Kounan.” Chichiri said lightly. “No death is easy, Aidou…

but Chiriko was proud of what he did, too. He felt he was weak, but in the end, he proved how strong he was. That was his purpose. To be strong at a time when none of the rest of us were able. Maybe it is unfair — life itself by definition is unfair. But even so, he made his own choice… as a man, not as a child."

"He wasn't a coward." Tasuki said frankly. "He could be a cry-baby and an idiot sometimes — but dammit, for a kid, he sure had guts in the end. When it mattered. I ain't forgotten that… he'd have made a good bandit, when he'd gotten bigger."

Anzu saw the glimmer of tears in the redhead's eyes, although he controlled them well, and her heart clenched slightly in her throat, sympathy welling up within her as she fought the urge to hug him.

"When you find Chiriko, then, will you be able to save Kounan without Tamahome?" She asked instead. "And without Suzaku no Miko — can you summon Suzaku that way?"

"We're not summoning Suzaku. At least, I don't think we are." Chichiri shook his head. "If it was to do with that, Miaka would have been drawn back again, like she was the last time. We can't summon the Beast God without the Miko."

"Without Taiitsukun's guidance, we're sort of wandering in the dark, aren't we." Nuriko sighed. "You're quite sure we can't get there, Chichiri? Not at all?"

"Not unless you want to be fricasseed." Tasuki said baldly, and Chichiri nodded.

"Tasuki's right. It's a no go, you know." He said sadly. "Taiitsukun, Nyan Nyan — I can't pick up either one of them, even when my power is working right. We're on our own… we have to find our own solution, this time around."

"Then we're back to figuring out the next step… and waiting for Chichiri's powers to come back." Nuriko reflected. "Chichiri, if you drew on our life forces, do you think you'd recover more quickly?"

"I don't know." Chichiri admitted. "But I'm not willing to risk it. I think you've been reborn in the temporary forms you have because you need that strength and physical presence… and curing Tasuki of the byouma last night almost did Hotohori-sama a fair bit of damage. I don't want to do the same to anyone else… besides, my magic is recovering. It's just not quite there yet. That's all."

He shrugged, stretching his arms over his head as he got to his feet.

“The choices are simple.” He said lightly. “We can wander or we can stay. When my magic is back, I’ll try and track Chiriko but I had such trouble with each of you that I can’t guarantee finding him, you know? On the offchance that I can’t find him through magic ends — maybe it’s worth thinking about where he might be… Eiyou is a possibility, since that’s where he came to save us from Amiboshi’s flute, at Suzaku’s shrine. Or he might even be in Sairou — that was where he fought Miboshi and died, so we can’t rule it out completely. In which case, it’ll be a major transfer, you know — I’ll need to have all my strength returned to get all of us to the Western lands and back in one piece.”

“Are you going there now?” Tasuki stared at him in surprise, and Chichiri smiled, shaking his head.

“I haven’t even got the magic to take us back to the old farmhouse right now.” He responded.

“So what the hell are you doing, then?”

“Going to pay my respects to my family, of course.” The monk said lightly. “Since we’re not going to be moving immediately, I thought I’d take the time to walk up to see them — if that’s all right with all of you.”

“But your family are dead, aren’t they?” Tasuki frowned. “Ain’t that gonna make it a pretty borin’ conversation?”

Nuriko sighed, burying his head in his hands.

“I don’t think that’s what he meant, idiot.” He said wearily, and Tasuki’s eyes widened as he realised the implication in his companion’s words.

“Shit.” He said, then as an afterthought. “Sorry.”

Chichiri eyed him for a moment, then he laughed, shaking his head.

“When you say things like that, Tasuki-kun, I can forgive them.” He said playfully. “And it was a long time ago. But I ought to go — it’s been a while since I did, after all.”

“You’ll go alone?” Mitsukake asked softly, and Chichiri nodded.

“If you all don’t mind.” He agreed. “It’s sort of an alone thing, you know? And I won’t be far. You know this area anyhow, Mitsukake — if you need me, I’m sure you can find me.”

“I have visited your village.” Mitsukake nodded. “So that’s not a problem.”

He smiled, warmth lighting up his sober features for a moment.

“Give your people our greetings too.” He added softly. “And say a prayer for mine as well, while you’re at it. I doubt I’ll get to do it myself… and I may see them again soon enough, anyway.”

Chichiri’s expression softened, and he nodded his head.

“Understood, you know.” He said evenly. “I’ll come back here, when I’m done… hopefully the air and the contemplation will do my magic some good.”

With that he was gone, the door swinging shut behind him, and Nuriko sighed, shaking his head.

“Tasuki, you are an indiscreet ape sometimes, you know.” He said resignedly. “You’re lucky it was Chichiri. If it had been my family, I’d have whacked you one.”

“Hey, I didn’t do it on purpose.” Tasuki defended himself. “The way he was talking, it sounded like he was going to speak to them. And they’re dead dead, not like you dead. It’d be pretty dumb to go speak to a slab of rock.”

Nuriko eyed him contemplatively for a moment. Then he lifted his hand, tapping Tasuki gently across the cheek and sending the bandit tumbling from his stool.

“Genrou!” Anzu let out an exclamation, hurrying to help him to his feet, but he pushed her away, scrambling up and banging his hands down on the table as he glared at his fellow Seishi.

“What the hell was that for?” He demanded. “I didn’t do anything to you!”

“No, but I decided I’d hit you anyway.” Nuriko said reflectively. “For old time’s sake. After all, I might not have another opportunity.”

“I’m startin’ to think burying you again is a good thing.” Tasuki glowered, rubbing his cheek. “Yeesh, you were less trouble when you were at least pretending to act like a man.”

“Do you think Hou Jun is all right?” Aidou pursed her lips, casting a glance towards the door. “Coming so close to a place where something like that happened?”

“Hou Jun?” Tasuki blinked, his anger forgotten as he stared at his sister.

“Chichiri.” Aidou grimaced at him. “You can’t be that oblivious — surely you do know that he has another name?”

“Dammit, of course I do.” Tasuki snapped. “What I mean is, since when did you start calling him by it? Up till now you’ve called him Chichiri-san — what’s the deal?”

His eyes widened.

“Don’t tell me that while I was dying of fever you and he were…” He said in shocked tones, trailing off meaningfully and Anzu winced at his tactless innuendo. “And here I was thinking it was killing the byouma that wiped him out, but…”

Thwack!

Before he could say another word, Aidou had brought her fingers hard and fast across his other cheek, glaring at him with indignant rage as she put her hands on her hips.

“Geez, Oneechan, will you get a grip already?” Tasuki exclaimed.

“*You* learn to stop and actually think about these crazy things before you say them!” Aidou bristled, anger flickering in her gaze, and for the first time Anzu realised that sister and brother shared the same bronzeish, flame-flecked eyes. “You do realise what you’re implying — about your sister, about your friend…!”

“Well, you’re the one suddenly calling him Hou Jun and worrying about whether he’s ‘all right’.” Tasuki retorted. “What am I going to think? He’s a man. You’re a woman — even if you are completely mad!”

“Shun’u!”

Aidou seemed to be preparing a second assault, and Anzu decided it was time to take a hand, reaching out to touch the older woman on the arm.

“Aidou, he’s just being Genrou.” She said softly. “And we know — well, *I* know — that he’s jumping to crazy conclusions. Ignore him. He’s just being an idiot.”

“Hey, who’s side are you on?” Tasuki was wounded by this, and Anzu wheeled on him, meeting his gaze with a firm one of her own.

“Women don’t like having their honour questioned, particularly not by men.” She said frankly. “Besides, I was with you last night, when you were at death’s door. Chichiri and Hotohori-sama gave all of their strength to help you. I know, because I was there doing the same thing. There’s nothing between Chichiri and Aidou — stop making mad assumptions!”

Tasuki gaped at her, and Hotohori's lips twitched into a slight smile as he registered the sparks between the two.

"Ah, *now* I see." He murmured, more to himself than anything. "Perhaps Tasuki's purpose in life is to learn tact, before he dies… and Anzu-chan, you might just be his teacher."

At this Anzu flushed, shaking her head.

Aidou sent her brother a cold look.

"If you want to know the truth, Shun'u, I asked to know his real name." She said quietly. "Because I wanted to know the name of the man who helped save my brother's life. And more, I'm sick to death of this stars of Suzaku thing. I wanted a real name — something tangible. Not something hanging in the sky above Kounan. If you'd get your filthy brain out of the gutter for just a minute, you'd realise that."

There were tears glittering on her lashes, and she shook her head impatiently as if to clear them.

"I have no interest in any man, now or ever." She added bitterly. "You can play games with Anzu — if she's brave enough to take you on. But I've passed that point of view now. When you grow up, maybe you'll understand that — not everything can be nicely and neatly reborn!"

With that she got to her feet, stalking out of the chamber and banging the door behind her.

For a moment there was silence, then Nuriko let out his breath in a rush.

"You and your sister sure have an interesting relationship." He said wryly, and Tasuki grimaced.

"Now you know why I went to Reikaku-zan." He replied darkly, still rubbing his cheek. "Her and the other three task-master sisters that made my life hell."

"You really shouldn't have said that to her, though. It was tactless." Anzu said, casting the door a troubled look, then turning her gaze on the hapless bandit. "Even for you. Genrou, Aidou has feelings, you know. And you really don't understand anything about them. Last night she was really upset — she thought you were going to die. We both did. Today, you say something like that. She only hits you because you make her mad, you know — and you deserved it, this time."

Tasuki was silent for a moment, contemplating.

“So what? You think I should go after her and grovel?” He asked at length. “Yeesh. Women make a fuss over the funniest things. You’d have thought she’d have liked the idea that a man might take notice of her. Even if it wasn’t true. I can see how *Chichiri* might’ve been insulted, but…”

“You are impossible.” Nuriko sighed. “You have no concept of a woman’s heart at all, do you, Tasuki-kun?”

“And Aidou’s not an ugly woman, nor a cold one.” Hotohori said soberly. “She’s your sister, so it hasn’t occured to you — but she is still a woman, and Anzu is right.”

“Fine.” Tasuki sighed, shaking his head in resignation. “So I’ll go talk to her. Anything for a quiet life.”

“Just tell her you’re sorry.” Anzu advised. “That should do.”

“The less words you use, the less likely your chances are of being slapped.” Tamatama interjected lightly at that point, from where he had been watching the conversation with detached amusement. “First rule of dealing with women, Tasuki-san… you need a little more delicacy.”

“I’ve been telling him that for years.” Nuriko slapped his forehead. “It’s no use. He’s a lost cause.”

“This from a pair of cross-dressers.” Tasuki muttered. “All right, already. I’m going. Give me a break.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Anzu asked. Tasuki glanced at her, then shook his head.

“No. You might get caught in the firing line.” He said frankly. “This is my stupid sister, after all… leave her to me.”

Aidou was not in the immediate vicinity of the inn, and as Tasuki headed down the main street, he ran over in his head the conversation, weighing up everything that had been said.

“The problem is that she’s a woman and I just don’t get how they tick.” He decided eventually. “But I ain’t gonna let everyone gang up on me. Shit, why did I get stuck with sisters? Brothers would have been way easier to figure out — at least you can talk to a brother without getting slapped every five seconds for something you don’t even remember you’ve said!”

At that moment he spotted a cloaked form just outside the city

walls, and he frowned, setting his teeth as he prepared to do battle with his eldest sibling. For a second, he almost considered arming himself with his tessen, in case Aidou was still in a spitting rage, but with a sigh he discarded the idea, remembering that even if she was his sister, and quite definitely insane, she was also a woman.

"So I can't hit her, dammit. Even if she deserves it." He muttered. "It's not my fault if shes so sensitive… geez, it was only a suggestion, after all. Why is she so weird about everything, anyway? If it'd been Kouji, he'd just have laughed about it and pushed it away… why are girls so quick to react to nothing at all?"

As he approached his target, he tensed, preparing to flee at the first sign of aggression, but Aidou was sitting on the grass outside the city walls, playing idly with a flower as she stared off into the distance. Tasuki faltered for a moment, confused. Then, with an awkward thud, he dropped down beside her.

"I'm sorry." He said, without any preamble. "If I said something to piss you off. Don't hit me… but I didn't mean to make you go psycho."

"Shun'u?" Aidou glanced up at his voice, and Tasuki frowned, nodding his head.

"Who else do ya think, you idiot?" He demanded. "Well? Are you gonna yell at me or ain't you? Get it out of your system, huh? Cos you were embarrassing me in there, in front of my friends, and…"

He faltered, registering the tears that glittered on his sister's lashes.

"Hell, Aidou, are you crying?"

Aidou didn't answer, and Tasuki frowned, now alarmed.

"Shit… I didn't know *you* could do that."

"I'm no different from that girl of yours, you know." Aidou said quietly. "Your Anzu… she cries, doesn't she?"

"Anzu's not… and yeah, I guess she does, but…"

"I'm human too." Aidou said frankly. "And you say the worst things sometimes, Shun'u. And the most stupid thing is, you don't even know you're saying them till after they've come out."

"Aidou… why aren't you yelling at me?" Tasuki was unnerved. "You were givin' me hell back there — I don't know how to handle you if you're not shouting at me. It's not natural — it's not you. Come on, snap out of it!"

Aidou was silent for a moment. Then she raised her head sharply,

meeting his gaze as she brought her hand down hard against his cheek.

“That’s for being an idiot.” She said, her voice shaking. “And for me being an idiot enough to care what damn well happens to you!”

“Aidou…” Tasuki touched his cheek, eying his sister in consternation. “Shit, Anzu was right. You *do* have feelings.”

“You only just realised that?” Aidou demanded. “Of course I do, you moron.”

“You really were worried about me last night, then? Anzu wasn’t making that up?”

“God knows why I should have been, when all you do is put our family through one hell after another.” Aidou turned away, staring out across the landscape. “But you’re my brother, so I was. We’ve only ever tried to protect you, no matter how ungrateful you are. We didn’t want you to die for Suzaku, that’s all. We… wanted to keep you. You might be a tactless, impulsive oaf, but I don’t have any other brothers ’cept you. So… that’s just how it is, I suppose, when you’re the eldest and you have to look out for all the rest.”

“Ai…” Tasuki faltered, lost for words, and Aidou shrugged, offering him a faint smile.

“Ma really did cry, when she saw the mark on your arm.” She added. “I remember. I remember asking her why she was crying, and her telling me the legend of Suzaku and what it all meant. And I remember deciding then and there that I wasn’t going to let any red bird take you away. I didn’t want to see Ma cry again — and you were my brother, so I wanted you to stay where you belonged, on the farm, with us. Even though you never really understood that. We wanted you to be strong, be brave, be all the things that you’d need to be to be able to survive if the Miko ever came to Kounan. But we all hoped she wouldn’t… because we all knew that it might mean layin’ you in some grave or other before you were old enough to choose a life for yourself.”

She swallowed hard, and Tasuki stared at her, speechless at this side of his sister he had never before seen.

“O’ course, you were dense, an’ ran off to Reikaku-zan to put yourself constantly in danger.” She added ironically. “To be a man, or whatever it was — I don’t know, I don’t care. Last night, though, I thought your luck had run out. I came with you because I promised Ma I would — that I’d stop you from recklessly avengin’ the fire. I

never imagined anythin' like this. An' if not for that girl's strength, you might not have made it. I hate that I cried, but I couldn't help it — you're an idiot, but you're my brother. So I did."

An awkward silence hung in the air between them, then Tasuki sighed.

"All of that stuff… is true?" He asked hesitantly. Aidou nodded, and Tasuki muttered a string of curses.

"You didn't have to come, you know. I don't need protectin' now." He said at length. "I am grown, an' I can fight my own battles. You should know now, after last night, that I ain't weak and I'm not gonna die for Suzaku or anyone until I'm old an' too tired to wield the tessen any more. I'm noone's sacrifice, Nee-chan. You should know that."

"I suppose I do." Aidou agreed softly. "But even so, you can't help being afraid. Shun'u, while you were fighting Kutou with your Suzaku friends, I was… I was almost engaged to be married. He… he made me a promise that, after the war was over, that's what we'd do. He gave me… gave me his word, that he was going to fight for freedom in our land and come home a hero, with stories to tell the children."

"Someone asked *you* to marry them?" Tasuki's eyes almost fell out of his head, and Aidou nodded.

"Yes." She whispered. "But he didn't come back a hero. He didn't come back at all. I don't even know where he is, now. His body's somewhere in a soldier's grave — I never even saw it to say goodbye. And so… when I think of you, fightin' and risking your life for Kounan all the time — I worry about seeing the same thing. That one day, a message will come to Ma and Pa that you've lost your battle, too… that you won't come back at all. Like the families of your friends… we… we all wait for the day it will be *our* turn to grieve."

"Oneechan." Tasuki gawped at her, and Aidou swallowed hard.

"You say some stupid things." She whispered. "Insensitive, idiotic things. But you're still my brother, and I still love you, and that's why you damn well make me so mad. You don't get it — you never did get it. Hou Jun… Hou Jun lost someone too, and he understood — he understood the way I felt. That's all. He's a friend — he's someone you trust and someone I've come to trust, too. But to say… to say something like… like that…"

She faltered, her bronze eyes swimming with emotion, and Tasuki bit his lip. Hesitantly and a little awkwardly, he put his arms around his sister's body, holding her tightly as she buried her head in his

shoulder, shaking with her tears. For a moment they sat there, brother and sister, for the first time truly understanding each other's point of view. Then, at length, Tasuki spoke.

"I'm sorry." He said frankly, and there was no need for him to explain what for. Aidou raised her gaze to his, offering him a faint smile through her tears.

"It's all right." She said softly. "This time… I guess."

"I ain't gonna die though, Nee-chan. I promise."

"Don't." Aidou shook her head. "You don't know if you can k… keep it, and I… I don't like broken promises."

"Whatever you say." Tasuki stood, hauling her to her feet as he did so. "But I mean it anyway. I'm not going to die. When we've fixed Kounan's troubles, and everything goes back to normal, I'm gonna live my life an' I'm gonna live a lot of it, too. It's like Nuriko said — I've things to do. So don't worry about me any more, huh? Worry about yourself, instead. You got a farm to rebuild, after all — don't you?"

Aidou's eyes flickered thoughtfully, and she nodded her head.

"Maybe… I do." She admitted. "I guess we'll see. When we… when we get back to… to the mountains."

"That's the spirit." Tasuki sent her a wolfish grin. "Hell, maybe Hotohori's right. Maybe there *is* a family resemblance between you an' me after all."

"Maybe." Aidou admitted cautiously. "But you're still a tactless idiot. An' you an' I don't have that in common."

She frowned, eying him ruefully.

"We've never talked. We've always argued." She reflected. "I suppose I never thought we would. But maybe you've grown up more'n I thought — maybe you understand better, for having been one of Suzaku's people. Fighting with Hou Jun and the others… and this Miko woman, too… perhaps you did learn how to be a man, after all. I'm startin' to think… maybe I've underestimated you."

"I've been telling you all that for a long time." Tasuki said bluntly. "Would I be Kashira at Reikaku-zan if I was a lost cause?"

"You know how I feel about your bandits." Aidou said pensively. "Although I suppose they did help the village, after the… the fire. And you… that was because of you, wasn't it? Because they were your men… they jumped to it, and helped. Because it was your order…

they didn't question it. And you did it… because it was our village. I'd reasoned that all out, you know, but not quite as clearly as I have now."

She smiled slightly.

"Maybe I *can* see what Anzu sees in you." She added.

"Anzu." Tasuki frowned. "If you're gonna begin again on all that stuff you were spoutin' earlier, Aidou…"

"Listen, otouto-kun." Aidou held up her hands, sadness in her expression. "Whether you like it or not — whether you can see it or not — that girl loves you. And I'm pretty sure you're fond of her, though how fond is hard to say. The truth is, we're neither one of us quick off the mark in that regard. When I was courted… I accepted it, I went along with it — but I never really thought about how much he meant to me or what it was all about. Not until I knew he wasn't coming back… and I knew it was too late to change it. Anzu's not a coward, and she's putting herself in harm's way to be with you. I don't want you to get to that point, that's all — where you realise what she means to you after she's beyond your reach."

"I…" Tasuki hesitated, then he glanced at his hands.

"Hell, I don't know what to do about Anzu." He admitted candidly. "What she did last night… when Chichiri told me… it took me aback, ya know? I never asked her to put her life on the line to help me, or anything like it. But she did, an' I sort of admire her for that. I mean, it's the same as I'd do for any of my friends, and well, maybe she's stronger than I thought — stronger than she was two years ago, anyway. But it's complicated. I hate women. I really… always have. But… I'm not like Nuriko. I mean, I don't like men. And… I guess… I don't *not* like women."

He faltered, looking awkward.

"She accused me of bein' in love with Miaka." He admitted at length. "An' I don't know what to say about that… because I don't know if it's true or if it ain't."

"Miaka?" Aidou frowned, then, "Suzaku no Miko?"

Tasuki nodded.

"Yeah."

"You mean you were..?" Aidou's eyes widened, and Tasuki shrugged.

“Dunno.” He said frankly. “I told you. I don’t understand women. And sure, I liked Miaka. I miss Miaka. An’ she was… a woman to me, not jus’ another sister, in the end. But… aw, I don’t know. The whole thing’s way too messed up and complicated. That’s why I don’t bother with girls. I don’t know what to do with ‘em, and Anzu’s no exception. I jus’ wanted a nice peaceful break from all of it, and she’s right there, on my mountain, as if she owns the place. And now she wants to stay, full time… an’ after she helped save my life, I can’t really say she can’t — it ain’t the right thing to do. But… dammit, I wish I didn’t have to deal with women at all. It was easier when it was jus’ avoidin’ being whacked by you or one of the others.”

Aidou gazed at him for a moment. Then, much to Tasuki’s surprise, she laughed, reaching up to ruffle his hair affectionately.

“Oneechan?” He eyed her warily, taking a step back. “Don’t… you’re freakin’ me out, bein’ nice to me an’ all.”

“I’m sorry.” Aidou looked amused. “But… it’s just… you say some funny things sometimes, Shun’u.”

“Hell, I was being serious!”

“I know you were.” Aidou nodded. “But even so, it’s funny. Did you ever stop to think maybe the reason Anzu makes you so uncomfortable is because *you* have feelings for her too?”

“Wha…?” Tasuki stared. “You mean… seriously?”

“Mmm, well, would she bother you so much otherwise?” Aidou asked simply. “Jus’ take that and think about it a while, huh? And listen, Shun’u. Whatever happens, don’t you go break that girl’s heart, all right? Else you’ll hear about it from me. If you let her down, at least get Hou Jun to tell you how to do it gently… because I will give you a hidin’ you’ll never forget if you hurt her an’ I get to hear about it. After what she did last night… you owe her that, at least.”

Tasuki was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then he shrugged.

“Right now, we gotta find Chiriko. Find him, and fix this world, else none of it will matter anyway.” He said at length. “So we should go back.”

“Did you listen to me?”

“I heard.” Tasuki nodded. “But I ain’t got anything else to say. Besides…”

He frowned, then spread his hands.

“I jus’ had a thought about where Chiriko might be.” He added. “Chichiri said to think about it — see if we could work out a likely location. An’ he could be in Eiyou but… I don’t know. I don’t think that’s where we’ll find him.”

“You lost me somewhere.” Aidou looked blank, and Tasuki smiled.

“We found Mitsukake near his old stomping ground in Choukou.” He said simply. ‘An’ I bet with Chiriko, it’ll be the same. Come on.’ He grabbed his sister by the hand. “We’ll find Chichiri an’ tell him to focus what magic he’s got on Jouzen. I bet that’s where he is.”

“Jouzen?”

“Chiriko’s family are from there… that’s where he’s buried.” Tasuki nodded, hauling his unprepared companion along behind him. “That’s where he was, before we met him. Studyin’ for some exam. An’ if I know Chiriko, an’ I do — wherever he is an’ whatever he’s doing — it’ll have some connection to dusty old scrolls an’ ink somewhere along the line!”

“But Hou Jun said he wanted time alone with his family!”

“Aidou, people are walking around who should be dead and given what Mitsukake an’ Hotohori-sama got up to, we shouldn’t be leavin’ Chiriko to his own devices.” Tasuki said firmly. “If we don’t fix this world, Chichiri might find himself joinin’ his damn family — will you come on already? This is more important — let’s go!”

Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty

So that was it.

Chiriko sat back, running his gaze over the paragraph a second time as he chewed down absently on his bottom lip. The day had worn on unnoticed, as he had gone painstakingly through each and every volume and scroll and at last, the answer lay there in front of him, clear in black and white.

"So I was right. The *stars* were the first sign." He murmured, fingering the edge of the parchment hesitantly as he did so. "And if my theorising is right, Taikyoku-zan has probably also become compromised, upsetting the spiritual balance of this world completely. If I'm correct and the mountain is somehow connected… that it's the physical manifestation… But this is serious. More serious even than I thought it was at first. No wonder I've been flung back — and to a place such as this. Still, it's no good, me being here and reading through all of these things time and time again. It's quite clear what has to be done — that I need the others and as soon as I can bring them here. I wish my life force was stronger — but this form is unstable and I can't be sure whether or not I can send out that kind of a signal. Doing so might leave me open to the things I've been fighting again — I wonder… should I risk it? Can I… can I risk it?"

He bit his lip, glancing down at his foot where a faint reddish haze flickered momentarily into view, before disappearing once more.

"It's never been constant when I needed it most." He whispered. "My thoughts, my fears, everything — I need to be able to understand! I need to be able to call my comrades, to explain to them… but can I? Am I strong enough to keep fighting this ghost?"

He frowned, setting the book aside and getting to his feet, moving to the window of the dusty archive room as he gazed out over the streets of Jouzen. From there he could see his mother's house, and a faint pang of nostalgia touched his heart as the child inside of him longed to run home for comfort.

"It would be so easy to do." He realised. "To go home, to speak to them, to try and pretend none of this was real. But I caused enough trouble once by running away from my responsibilities. Besides, I

can't ever go home, now. It's not home to me, not any more. There's a new Ou Doukun now… my nephew. And… and I have to uphold my brother's faith in me. He called his son my name because he thought I was strong and brave — that I'd given everything for Kounan and that I'd not hesitated in doing my duty. I *won't* be afraid — I won't give up now. Even though I'm scared… I won't give up."

He clenched his fists, forcing aside his childish reservations as he hardened his resolve.

"I *must* bring Chichiri and the others here as soon as I can." He decided. "I'm not strong enough to travel far, and in this form, I don't know what might happen if I tried. I'm still just a kid, after all — someone might attack me and I have no idea how to defend myself when I'm using all the strength I have to confine my memories of Miboshi inside of me. Even to contact the others — even to do that — I'm going to have to let go of that contol. I… I hope I can manage it. There's no other way — but I… I have to try."

He turned back to the desk, biting his lip once more as he surveyed the mess of scrolls and rough-edged books, some of them little more than beige vellum tied with thick.leather thongs.

"I'm sure that Chichiri will understand, when he sees this. Hotohori-sama too, considering how much he knows about Kounan's history." He reflected. "Maybe one of them can take my train of thought further. At least now I know *why* this has happened — or at least, I'm fairly sure I do. Surely if you have the reason, you can find the solution?"

He sank down on the floor, hesitating, then closing his eyes, bringing his hands together as very slowly he released his tight grip on the strength and uncertain emotions that wound their way together through his soul. As he did so, a dark wave of despair and fear washed through him and he let out a gasp, struggling to maintain his concentration as a spectral face loomed large in his mind. A stabbing, suffocating sensation wracked through him as he heard the whispers of the man's voice deep within his heart.

"*This body is so badly defended*."

The voice was mocking, and for a moment, Chiriko felt himself lose his grip on his senses entirely. Then, as he remembered the strange stellar omen in the sky above Kounan, he fought back against it, pushing his hands together more firmly as he concentrated as much energy as he could on putting a signal into the ether.

"Miboshi is dead. He's gone. I killed him." He muttered, sweat

beading his brow as he redoubled his concentration. Tears slipped silently down his cheeks but he paid no attention to them, fighting the urge to flee or scream as he allowed the dark waves to overtake him once again. “He’s not here, and I’m not supposed to be, either. If I do this — if we solve this — I’ll never have to worry about Miboshi or letting down my comrades again. If I can bring them here, then this will all be settled. I’m going to prove I’m the Suzaku Warrior my brother was proud enough to name his first-born son after. For the sake of the new Ou Doukun, I’m going to do my duty and save Kounan. I’m *not* going to be beaten by hallucinations. It’s just a figment of this world’s instability — that’s all it is! It’s not real… *it’s all in my head*!”

This last phrase he muttered fiercely out loud, and something in the sound of his own voice in the empty room gave him renewed strength.

“Chichiri. Tasuki. Mitsukake. Nuriko. Hotohori-sama.” He whispered. “All of you — *any* of you — if you’re there and you can feel me, please, know that I’m trying to find you. Chichiri, your magic… please use it to come to Jouzen. I can’t come to you — but I need you. Kounan needs all of us — all of us as soon as possible. Please… if you can feel my call… come find me!”

The river was quiet and calm, as Chichiri wandered absently along it’s winding banks, drawing closer and closer to the village where he had spent happy days as a young boy. As he approached the settlement itself, a wave of bittersweet nostalgia washed over him and he paused, eying the scene with a faint, resigned smile.

It was still a village, he reflected, but no longer *his* village. People had migrated and settled in the land once owned by those he’d known and liked, for with the danger of future flooding came fertile lands for crops and close, convenient connections to prosperous local towns in the north. In the final analysis, he knew, the benefits had outweighed the risk. His own family had taken the same gamble, and had paid the ultimate price for it, but as he stood there, watching as if detached from everything around him, he found that he felt no bitterness towards the new settlers for their wilful ignorance of danger.

“Life has to go on, you know.” He murmured, entering the village at long last and wandering along the central street towards the place where his own family’s once moderately expansive property had originally stood. The building had been washed away by the flood, his sister and family along with it, but already new housing had been erected on the site, and he could hear the sound of children laughing

as they played inside. For some reason, despite the memories it brought back, he felt content.

Satisfied, he nodded, turning back towards the river that ran so close to the settlement of old. This wasn't his home now, and there was no longer anything here that he remembered. Even those he had loved did not really lie here — they had been swept away by the water, and for the most part, had never been recovered.

"Shouryuu-gawa." He reflected, as he knelt beside the bank of the river, near the place where Hikou had been taken in the terrible, relentless current eight years earlier. "The river brings life and takes life away. I suppose it's like with anything — there is no benefit without pain."

He brought his hand up before his face in prayer, closing his eyes as his thoughts drifted towards the family and friends he had lost. Away from the midst of the village life and lost in his own world, few people paid him much attention, although one or two young children stared wide-eyed at the one-eyed monk praying so devoutly by the water's edge.

At length he lowered his hands, opening his good eye as he took a deep breath into his lungs, sitting back on his heels.

"It doesn't feel the way it did, for so long." He realised. "Fighting Hikou was the worst thing I've ever had to do, but still, it brought me closure I never thought I'd have. For the first time, I suppose, I knew why it happened. Why he… why Koran… I understand, now. And when you understand, you can let go… just sometimes the understanding is the hard part."

A slight smile twitched at his lips.

"That's something I ought to be working into Tasuki." He reflected ruefully. "Especially where Anzu is concerned. I took having you for granted, Koran, and I lost you in the end. I can manage, now, on my own — if that's how it's going to be. But he's not like me that way… I hope he's got sense enough to realise it. He's too young and idealistic to be dragged down the way I was. Hot tempered, impulsive, just the way I was when I was younger… maybe I see myself in him a little — but he doesn't need to learn the lessons I did. At least, not the way I have. If I can teach him something at least, maybe he won't have to."

He shrugged, getting to his feet and brushing the dirt and grass from his clothing.

"Well, Hikou. Well, Koran. Otousan, Okaasan, Imouto-chan." He

said aloud, a pensive gaze in his ruby eye. “I suppose that I’m off yet again — back to doing Suzaku’s bidding. I haven’t forgotten the promise I made you, Hikou — one day, we will be reunited. But it won’t be just yet — I have other things I need to do first. I think this time you understand, though — and me, too.”

He paused, pursing his lips as he gazed up at the sky.

“Perhaps that’s why, of all of us, I’ve been less haunted by my doubts in all of this.” He realised. “Unlike the others, I… I no longer have anything to plague me. I’m at peace with my past — because I’ve had to face it so brutally in so many ways. I’m past the place where I wanted to die — I’ve punished and criticised myself so much over the years that no negative force could possibly pour worse onto me. I wonder if that *is* true… have I been warding against it, or is it just that I’m so used to fighting negative thoughts that I’ve become strong enough to overcome them without even realising they’re there? Even Tasuki was affected this time — even the man who plunges into battle without a second thought or a regret in his mind. But not me… I wonder, have I really become so strong?”

As he stood there, gazing absently at a wisp of white cloud, something sharp jolted through his senses and he jerked to attention, glancing around as if expecting to see the source of the sensation somewhere close by. He was alone, however, and he bit his lip, summoning all his strength as he struggled to relocate the signal.

“Chiriko, was that you?” He muttered. “After all this — and even with my power too weak for me to reach you — are you trying to find me out?”

There was no response, and try as he might, Chichiri could not make the connection a second time. He sighed heavily.

“Damn the byouma.” He murmured. “In this atmosphere it’s taking longer for my spiritual powers to heal than normally it would… it took more of my magic to drive that thing out than it might have done otherwise. My psyche might be immune to this negativity, but my magic certainly hasn’t been — I’ve not been one hundred percent on par since we got back to Reikaku-zan the first time around and it’s a worrying sign. If anything, I’m starting to wonder if I’m becoming weaker. After last night, it’s hard to be sure, but if this world really is breaking down, it’s something that I might have to consider.”

His lips thinned as he contemplated this.

“That probably means this world is growing weaker, and that all of us are as well — not just me.” He reflected. “Half-formed undead

Seishi flung back at random — if that isn't a sign of a decaying plane of existance, I don't know what is. Still, I can't start doubting in myself now. If my strength is lessening, then I'll just have to make sure I have as much of it to use as I can to find Chiriko and help put this to rights. Noone else has noticed, in any case, and so long as they don't, it's all right. I won't make them worry about something that can't be helped — we just need to move faster."

"Chichiri!"

At that moment, a voice startled him from his thoughts and he turned, seeing Tasuki hurrying towards him, his sister in tow. Aidou looked suspiciously like she'd been crying, but Chichiri decided not to mention it, instead taking in the eager expression on the bandit's face.

"Tasuki-kun — what are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Hou Jun. I tried to tell him you wanted to be alone…" Aidou faltered, but Chichiri shook his head, offering her a smile.

"It's all right. I was done here anyway." He reflected. "How did you find me, though? You've not been to my village before, Tasuki — have you…?"

"I followed your chi." Tasuki said frankly, and Chichiri stared at him.

"You did… what?" He asked faintly. Tasuki snorted.

"Don't look so surprised." He said bluntly. "We tracked along the river a while, cos I knew you came from somewhere along it, and then, just a minute or two ago, I felt where you were. Did you do something? A spell or something? Cos I thought your magic was dead."

"It's not dead. It's coming back bit by bit." Chichiri responded. "And yes, I did try… just then, I focused my energy on something. I think it was Chiriko — At least, that's what it seemed like. But it was so brief… just a flash sensation, nothing more. It seemed like he was trying to find me — and that he was to the south. But nothing more than that."

"To the south." Triumph glittered in Tasuki's bronze eyes and he wheeled on his sister, taking her off-guard. "Didn't I tell you so? I *told* you! I *know* this kid!"

"Tasuki?" Chichiri's brow furrowed in confusion, and Tasuki grinned, revealing fang-like teeth as he did so.

"Chiriko's in Jouzen." He said simply. "He's gone home. Like

Mitsukake — like you, now… he's gone back to where his people are."

Chichiri's good eye widened, and slowly he nodded his head.

"Jouzen." he repeated. "You know, I think you've hit it on the head. That would make sense with what I felt just now. I think you're right — that *is* where he is."

"So we need to find the others and head to Jouzen, right?" Tasuki demanded. "How much of your magic is back — can we hat-hop yet, or…?"

"No… I don't think so." Chichiri pursed his lips. "But we could hire horses and ride south. It would be a start, if nothing else. By tomorrow, my magic may be good enough for us to travel that way… I don't want to risk it right now, you know. It's not fully healed and we could end up anywhere."

"Knowing your landings, I'll pass." Tasuki grimaced. "But if we know where we're going, sitting around here seems a bit pointless. Let's go back to the inn and tell the others about my stroke of genius, huh? Yeesh, you guys'd all be lost without me, you know."

Chichiri laughed, patting his friend playfully on the back.

"Consider us grateful." He said lightly, ruby eye sparkling with humour. "All right, Tasuki-kun, Aidou… let's go back to the others."

"Did you… did you manage to send your message to your family?" Aidou asked softly, as they turned in the direction of the city. Chichiri nodded.

"Yes." He agreed evenly. "For the first time, coming back here wasn't painful. I suppose it really is in the past now, you know. Closure. I had a lot of things left open — especially with Hikou and everything that happened between us. But that's not true any more."

"Then you'll heal your scar, when you get back to Reikaku-zan?"

Chichiri looked startled, then he shook his head slowly.

"Mitsukake's holy water is meant for more deserving things than my selfish vanity." He said quietly. "I've made up my mind about that — I won't use it to fix something that I've learnt to live with. This is who I am, now. To change it — that would be saying that I was ashamed of my past, or that I wanted to erase some part of it. I'm content this way, you know… I don't need to make myself look whole to feel whole inside. I'm fine and that's more important to me, you know?"

“You really do talk a lot of shit sometimes, Chichiri.” Tasuki said bluntly, and Chichiri chuckled.

“So do you.” He bantered back. “I wonder which of us was a bad influence on whom.”

“You’re both as bad as one another.” Aidou reflected, glancing up at the sky. “I think it’s going to rain, too — we’re going to get soaked.”

“Rain?” Chichiri started, following her gaze, and then frowning. “You’re right… when did those clouds come up so suddenly? A moment ago…”

Anything else he was about to say was drowned out by a clap of thunder, as lightning split the sky. Chichiri faltered, as Tasuki cursed, staring up at the heavens.

“Definitely a storm.” He muttered unecessarily. “Chichiri — can you take us back to the town with your *kasa*? We’re goin’ to get drenched an’ we’re right by that damn river of yours…”

“The river..” Chichiri hesitated, as the sky split a second time, this time bringing down cascades of rain that sent any stray villagers running for the shelter of their homes with exclamations of dismay. “Shouryuu-gawa.”

“Chichiri?” Tasuki nudged him with his elbow. “Are you with us? I’m getting soaked, and so is Aidou… if you could sense Chiriko, you must have enough magic to take us back to the city — mustn’t you?”

Chichiri pursed his lips, gazing at the flowing river for a moment, then up at the sky that had become dark almost in an instant. He gazed at the dark clouds, taking in their odd, spectral appearance, and his lips thinned.

“We’re running out of time.” He murmured, more than half to himself. “Whatever we have to do, Tasuki-kun, we’re running out of time to do it. The heavens — everything — it’s been in a delicate balance since Taiitsukun and Taikyoku-zan disappeared. It’s been struggling to cope — that’s why the atmosphere’s been as dark and as heavy as it has from time to time.”

“So that means what, exactly?” Tasuki asked, as he slipped his jacket off his back, putting it over his sister’s shoulders as Aidou shivered involuntarily. “Come on, stop theorising where we’re getting wet! We can discuss this back at the inn… wait for the storm to pass, and then…”

“The storm isn’t going to pass.” Chichiri said quietly, his heart clenching in his throat as he made out the rippling undertones in the ominous sky. “This isn’t an ordinary storm… don’t you feel it? This is the world… it’s a warning. It’s telling us that it can’t hang on much longer. It can’t maintain itself. We need… we need to get to Jouzen. And… find Chiriko. And then… we need to change this. We need to change this all…”

He frowned, then made up his mind, gripping his *kasa* firmly in his hand as he prayed inwardly that his spell would not go awry.

“Hang on tight.” He said grimly. “I’ll do my best, you know.”

With that he tossed the hat up into the air, muttering his incantation and closing his eyes as he focused all his energy on the inn in the city just beyond the river’s flow. This time they landed with a bump, Tasuki only just managing to prevent his sister from falling against the hard stone of the city streets, and Chichiri caught his hat, glancing at it in troubled silence.

“That wasn’t your best entrance point ever.” Tasuki said darkly. “But at least it isn’t raining here.”

“Yet.” Chichiri raised a hand, gesturing towards the horizon. “Look. The storm is spreading south. I expect it’s engulfed the borderlands already — Tamatama-san’s Yukigase and all of that region. Now it’s reached as far as Shouryuu-gawa and if it continues to rain like that, the river will flood again and I won’t be able to do anything to stop it. This is what we’ve been waiting for — the culmination of all the negative energy crackling against the atmosphere. It’s finally manifested itself into something else — we’re running out of time. We have to get to Jouzen and find Chiriko, fast.”

“But you said… your magic…” Tasuki faltered, and Chichiri shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll have to risk it.” He said flatly. “Go get the others — you’re faster on your feet than me and I need to catch my breath. I’ll do my best. It’s all we can do… we have to take the chance.”

Tasuki eyed him for a moment, then he nodded.

“Consider it done.” He said frankly, disappearing in the direction of the inn, and Chichiri dropped back against the wall, taking a deep breath.

“You’re not full strength, are you?” Aidou asked hesitantly. Chichiri started, then shrugged.

“Who is, in this kind of atmosphere?” He asked sadly. “I’ll have to take the gamble.”

“Then leave Anzu and I behind. And Nuriko-san’s friend.” Aidou said softly. “We’re not necessary to this — leave us here. It won’t be such a strain, if you do.”

Chichiri faltered for a moment. Then slowly he shook his head.

“No.” He said quietly. “I saw Shouryuu-gawa flood once. I saw people die. I won’t leave you here. If we don’t do something, then the rain will keep falling. It will fall till all of Kounan is washed away. Then, if nothing is done, it might start to spread into Kutou, Hokkan and Sairou, also… I wouldn’t like to bet they’re safe, if we can’t fix the problem in Kounan’s sky. I won’t leave you or Anzu in a place which might be so much at risk as this place, considering all of that. No, we’re *all* going to Jouzen. At least, there, it should be safe a little while longer while we get to grips with what we have to do.”

“Chichiri?”

At that moment, Nuriko’s voice startled them and the monk turned to see the rest of the Seishi approaching, with an anxious looking Anzu and a bemused Tamatama. “Tasuki says you want to leave now — what happened to letting your powers recover?”

“It’s just tough.” Chichiri said shortly. “We don’t have time to worry about it. We have to go to Jouzen and hope Tasuki’s hunch is right… that Chiriko’s there.”

“He’ll be there.” Tasuki said firmly, and Chichiri nodded.

“With any luck, the atmosphere won’t be so heavy there, and I’ll be able to make a decent landing.” He said softly, unlooping his *kesa* and spreading it on the ground as his grip tightened on his *shakujou*. “I don’t know how well this will work — it’s hard to weave any kind of spell here. I was slow — I didn’t realise that the spreading miasma around Choukou was more than just Mitsukake’s byouma. It was the first sign of atmospheric breakdown — the north of Kounan is already in trouble, and the worse this thick, cloying aura gets, the less likely I can use my spells at all. We need to leave here as soon as possible if we’re to have any chance of fixing this.”

“The north?” Tamatama paled. “Yukigase?”

“I wouldn’t like to say.” Chichiri admitted. “But you must come with us too, Tamatama-san. When this is over… when it’s all over, I’ll make sure you get back to you village. You have my word. But for now, it’s safer to stick with us. Really, the spell is going to take a lot of

my strength anyway — I'm just going to have to put it out there and hope for the best… it doesn't really matter if I'm taking five of us or eight, in the end. There's still a chance we might not end up where we want to be, so be prepared."

"That's Chichiri's way of sayin' it's gonna be a bumpy flight." Tasuki said grimly, grabbing Anzu firmly by the hand and putting his arm around Aidou's shoulders. "So hang on tight."

Chapter 22

Chapter Twenty One

The sun was still shining brightly in the sky over Jouzen when the other Seishi emerged from Chichiri's spell, landing with a rough bump on the green landscape leading down to the southern city. Birds still flew in a clear blue sky, and as the battered, shaken warriors and their companions pulled themselves to their feet, there was no sign of the looming storm on the horizon.

"You did it, Chichiri." Mitsukake reflected, as he glanced over towards the distinctive towers of Jouzen's skyline. "We're here, or near enough."

"Yes. Near enough." Chichiri scooped up his *kesa*, glancing it for a moment before re-fastening it around his body. "Thank goodness… I wasn't sure I'd hold the spell long enough, you… you know."

He faltered, stumbling to his knees, and Tasuki let out an exclamation.

"What the hell did you do to yourself?" He demanded. "You're *grey*, dammit — did you go and use all your strength bringing us here?"

"We got here. That's all that matters." Chichiri said weakly. "I'm all right. We need to find Chiriko… that's more important now."

"Tasuki's right, Chichiri. You don't look well." Nuriko bit his lip. "Maybe you should stay here, and we'll go look for Chiriko."

"No… no." Chichiri grabbed his *shakujou* more tightly, using it to pull himself to his feet. "You might need my senses to find his chi. Chiriko's signal is the weakest of all of you, and you're none of you as tuned as me to finding people."

"In that state, I doubt you could sense anything." Hotohori said, his eyes troubled. "At least let us give you some of our strength, Chichiri… Nuriko's right. We can't rely on you to do everything — you'll burn yourself out."

"We're all going to burn out, if this isn't resolved soon." Chichiri steadied himself, offering the former Emperor a weak smile. "It's the world that's the problem, not me or my magic. As time goes on, all of us are going to get weaker until we and this whole world is nothing at all. That's what's happening… the storm is the first sign of the world

losing it's battle to stay stable. We're all weakening. Not just me. While we have our power, we need to use it. And for that, we need to find Chiriko, and then…"

He hesitated, and Nuriko sighed.

"And then what?" He asked softly. "We don't know what we have to do. Even with the six of us — we don't really have a plan, do we?"

"Let's not stand around worrying about it." Tasuki snapped. "We need to find the kid… if his brain is working, maybe he'll have an idea… and even if not, we can bash him a few times till he does. We'll come up with something — but standin' here ain't achieving anything. Chichiri is right… everything's messed up with this world. There have been weird things since all of this began — hell, I almost fought with Kouji over somethin' stupid, back on the mountain, an' that ain't the way bandits behave. I'm sick of this — of all the weird shit going on. Let's just find the kid and worry about what's next when it comes."

"I still think Chichiri should stay here." Nuriko said doubtfully. "You might be alive now, Chichiri, but if you keep pushing yourself… believe me, you don't want to be dead. It's not all that great."

"I'll be fine." Chichiri shook his head, and Mitsukake frowned, stepping forward as he reached out a hesitant hand to touch his friend's arm.

"Stand still." He said quietly, and the monk stared at him blankly. "At least… let me help you, if you won't remain behind."

"Mitsukake…?" Chichiri faltered, and Mitsukake held out his left hand, stretching and clenching it a couple of times, then slowly beginning to unwind the bandage that had hidden his character from view.

"Are you nuts?" Tasuki exclaimed. "After what you put into me — Mitsukake, you can't use that! You'll give him the damn byouma!"

"No… I won't." Mitsukake ran his finger over his palm again, then he smiled. "It's all right. And it's as Chichiri said. We have to take chances. We need him… just as we all need each other."

Chichiri eyed the doctor for a moment, then, slowly, he nodded his head.

"I have faith in you." He said softly. "Do it."

Mitsukake closed his eyes for a moment, as the vivid red character blazed across his skin. Then he flexed his fingers, holding his hand inches from the monk's exhausted body as he focused his Suzaku

power. For a moment, nothing happened. Then there was the soft, spectral glow of green light, and Anzu let out a gasp, her eyes becoming big with disbelief.

“That’s not like… in Choukou.” She whispered faintly, and a smile touched Hotohori’s lips.

“Mitsukake’s back to himself.” He observed. “The healer.”

“In all the things I have had to do or face, one thing has always been a constant source of strength.” Mitsukake agreed, as colour slowly began to return to Chichiri’s worn features. “The trust and faith that my Suzaku brethren have in me. This, whatever it is, is to do with all of us. Our unity. That’s why I knew this time I could heal, not harm. When I’m on my own, there are fears and there are doubts. But when I’m with you — with all of you — those things always go away.”

“Suzaku’s power is the power of love and rebirth, isn’t it?” Nuriko said softly. “I suppose it’s true — as a team, we are stronger than any of us are on our own.”

“But we *are* still without Tamahome.” Hotohori reminded him.

“Still, now we’re near enough to Jouzen, we can find Chiriko, right?” Tasuki asked anxiously. “I mean, he has to be here.”

“He is.” Chichiri said softly, reaching out to push Mitsukake’s hand away as life flickered once more in his red eye. “That’s enough, Mitsukake… I know you’d heal me more, but you need your strength too, and you don’t have as much opportunity to rebuild it as I do. I’m all right now. The atmosphere here is better… and I can sense Chiriko’s chi now. It’s not strong, but it’s clear and distinct. I know where he is. Follow me.”

“And just like that, the march is on again.” Tamatama reflected, casting Nuriko a sidelong grin. Nuriko laughed.

“Now you understand.” He said playfully. “What it means to be a Suzaku Seishi.”

“Yeah…” Tamatama said thoughtfully. “Living and travelling in close companionship with some seriously attractive — if dead — males… now I understand the appeal all too well.”

“Tamatama.” Nuriko chuckled, shaking his head slowly.

“I’ve never been this far south. It’s still an adventure for me.” Tamatama owned. “Although I am worried about Yukigase… K… Nuriko, you will make sure…?”

“Whatever it is we have to do, I’m sure it will mean Yukigase is safe.” Nuriko assured him. “And your father and everyone there. We’re here to save Kounan, after all. Until we do that, I can’t be reborn and nor can the others. So we’ll do it… it will be all right. We’ll find a way… we always do.”

Tamatama pursed his lips, slowly nodding his head.

“You and your friends are strong beyond the strength Suzaku gave you.” He reflected. “You’re not like other people — I really see it now. You belong to Kounan… like Aidou-san said. You’re Suzaku’s sacrifice for this world… that’s your purpose here. Your true purpose. Isn’t it?”

“Guess so.” Nuriko nodded. “Guess we’ll see. But Mitsukake is right. We have faith in each other, and trust, too. So I think it will be fine. I’m determined to think that way, anyhow. We’ve overcome a lot of things, all of us — even death. This little star and world problem — we’ll handle it. Just like we’ve handled everything else.”

“You’re damn quiet.” As they headed into the city proper, Tasuki cast his sister a confused glance, and Aidou started, glancing up at him in surprise.

“Hrm?”

“You ain’t said a word since we left the north country… you aren’t travel sick, are you?” Tasuki frowned. “Just, quiet ain’t a normal thing for you.”

“No.” Aidou shook her head. “I’m fine. Really.”

“He really gave everything, didn’t he, to get us here?” Anzu murmured, startling the bandit as she appeared on his other side. “Chichiri, I mean. Just like he did to drive out your demon, Genrou. He’s really strong, isn’t he…?”

“Of course he is. He’s a Seishi, ain’t he?” Tasuki’s brow furrowed, and Aidou shook her head.

“No… it’s not that.” She murmured absently, a strange, half-distant look in her eyes. “It’s not to do with his power. It’s what Mitsukake-san said. Faith. In what he has to do. Just like… all of you.”

“Yes…” Anzu said pensively. “Like… like you used your tessen last night to kill that thing, even though you were exhausted, Genrou. It’s that same thing — never giving up on something because you believe you can overcome it. That.”

Aidou frowned, a pinkish tint touching her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Shun’u.” She added quietly. “I didn’t understand till now, what it meant to be Suzaku’s chosen.”

“Maybe Mitsukake should look at you, too, now he’s back to normal. You’ve not been actin’ like yourself at all since my fever.” Tasuki eyed her warily. “What the hell are you apologisin’ for?”

“For believing what you did was a curse… that that mark was something to be dreaded.” Aidou admitted. “I… I think I… understand. You… and they… what you are. Really. And… and I’m proud of you… for being Tasuki. Really. I… I am. Now I know what it really means. It’s not some… some divine star-studded being controlling your actions… but something stronger than anything else… not just to help Kounan, but each other. You… you and all of them…”

She trailed off, uttering a sigh.

“If Ma had known that, she wouldn’t have cried.” She reflected. “Miaka-sama was lucky — to have all of you to call to her aid. She really was.”

“You are really weirdin’ me out now. Shut up, all right?” Tasuki said bluntly. “I almost prefer it when you’re hittin’ me — at least I know what to do when you do that.”

“Where are we heading, Chichiri?” Anzu shot the bandit an amused look, then turned towards the monk, who tilted his head, casting her a smile.

“The most logical place for someone like Chiriko to be, you know.” He said frankly.

“Did he go home, then?” Hotohori wondered. “The last time, when we were flung out of Taikyoku-zan, I remember that he and I went to see his family…”

“No.” Chichiri shook his head. “I think, like you, he’s realised that home is somewhere he can’t go any more. No, I meant somewhere more attuned to the kind of Seishi he is.”

He paused, gesturing to a tall stone building, and Nuriko let out an exclamation.

“A school?”

“An archive.” Chichiri’s good eye twinkled. “Chiriko always was a dedicated student — it stands to reason that he’d be drawn to somewhere like this. Remember, he did want to be a government official, before Suzaku called him.”

“He was a weird kid.” Tasuki reflected. “He’d have made a better bandit, if I’d’ve had time to train him properly.”

“I don’t know about that, Tasuki-san.”

A fresh voice interrupted them at that moment, and as one the group turned to face the speaker who waited in the doorway, eying them in composed, calm amusement. His thick hair pulled back from his face, and his green eyes sparking with amusement and relief, the boy who stood before them had a presence about him, despite his short stature and fragile appearance. At the sight of him, Tasuki let out a yell, darting forward as he hugged the youngster tightly.

“*Chiriko*! You brat — why’ve you been hidin’ from us? We’ve been lookin’ all over the place — what the hell were you tryin’ to prove?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t really think I could leave here.” Chiriko returned the hug warmly, grinning up at the flame-haired bandit that he had always considered an honorary big brother. “But you’re all here now… I did hope you’d come. I’ve been trying to reach you for a few days now — on and off. I wasn’t sure… if my signal was strong enough to get through.”

“Yes, it did… eventually.” Chichiri offered the boy a smile. “We’re glad to see you… I don’t think we have a lot of time to figure things out.”

“Well, on those grounds, I have a few ideas.” Chiriko disentangled himself from Tasuki’s embrace, a serious expression touching his young features as he nodded his head. “I’ve been doing research — a lot of research. Waiting for you to turn up on the doorstep. I hoped you’d know to look for me in Jouzen… even if I wasn’t strong enough to reach you in any other way. I’m glad I was right.”

“That was Tasuki’s thinking.” Chichiri admitted. “He thought you’d be here, and he was right.”

“I told you so.” Tasuki said smugly. “I told you I knew how the kid thinks.”

“Genrou.” Anzu’s eyes widened, and then she smiled. “You guys are close, huh?”

“He’s like my kid brother, I suppose.” Tasuki sent her a wolfish grin. “He’s just a kid, after all — he needs a role model.”

“And *you’re* it?” Aidou arched an eyebrow, and Tasuki snorted, nodding his head.

“That’s more like the Oneechan I know.” He said frankly.

“So you’re Chiriko.”

Anzu stepped forward, eying the boy curiously. “Chichiri said you were smart… a genius. Is that true?”

“Some of the time.” Chiriko nodded his head. “Are you a friend of Chichiri-san’s, then? I don’t think… we’ve not met before, have we? My memories are still a little hazy.”

“No… we haven’t.” Anzu shook her head. “My name’s Anzu — I… I’m a friend of… Chichiri and Genrou. Tasuki. Both of them.”

“It’s complicated to explain right now, and we don’t have the time to worry about it.” Chichiri said frankly. “Chiriko, the north country is under storms and I’m worried about the structure of this world. That’s why we were so glad to find you.”

“I was afraid it might be like that.” Chiriko looked sober. “I haven’t made as much progress as I’d like… but I’ve done my best. Maybe you should come inside — I’ll show you what I’ve reasoned out.”

“Inside… a library place?” Tasuki eyed it doubtfully. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“If the boy has come up with something, we should hear it.” Mitsukake said with a wry smile. “It’s all right, Tasuki. If you catch anything from being near dusty old scrolls, I’m sure I can heal you.”

“Something like intelligence, maybe.” Nuriko snorted, amusement in his eyes as he linked his arm in the reluctant bandit’s. “Come on. It’s not a boat, so you can’t get seasick. Don’t be a baby — it’s only paper and ink. It won’t bite.”

“We’ll wait outside.” Aidou said quietly, touching Anzu on the arm and slowly shaking her head. “This is Seishi business, and we’ve no need to go in. They need to settle this themselves, Anzu-chan… you and I, we’ll wait for them.”

“Me too.” Tamatama said with a grin. “Aidou-san is right — and I’d like to explore Jouzen while I have the chance. You go do all the boring business stuff, Nuriko… just don’t disappear before I have a chance to say goodbye, all right?”

“Promise.” Nuriko nodded. “All right, Chiriko. Lead the way… we’re behind you.”

“Well, like I said, I’ve had mixed progress.” Chiriko admitted, entering the building and guiding them up the steps to the chamber in which he had spent the past few days. “My progress has been hampered a little by… other things.”

He frowned, glancing down at his foot, which glittered with red light.

“It’s been there since about half an hour ago, so I felt you were on your way — that maybe I’d made contact.” He added. “And when it is, I’m fine. But I’ve had to do a lot of this work without it, and it’s been hard going.”

“I think maybe we understand.” Hotohori said gravely. “None of us were sent back here quite ourselves… have you been plagued by demons too?”

“One demon.” Chiriko nodded grimly. “Miboshi. To begin with, I was quite trapped. But when my character appeared on my foot, it was like it broke through it, just a little — and I realised that I could fight against it. That it wasn’t real. So I did… I have. By analysing what was happening, I managed to force through it, little by little. It’s not been easy… but even so, I realised that if I was here, the best thing I could do would be to try and work out why. I saw the sky, and the omen in the stars… and I decided to do all the reading I could. The more focused my brain has been, the less the demons have bothered me — so it’s been helpful.”

“I thought you were only a genius when your character showed up.” Tasuki looked confused. Chiriko shrugged.

“Everything’s mixed around. My brain seems to be working okay, most of the time… so long as Miboshi isn’t stalking my thoughts.” He said frankly. “I think it’s because, when I died, I didn’t have my character. I fought him without it. And when I was a spirit, I was able to merge the two parts of myself and use my intelligence more easily. So… maybe it’s not dependant on that any more. I’m not sure. My understanding has been better when the character is there — probably because my mind is clearer. But even when it isn’t, if I really concentrate hard — I can still piece things together.”

He pushed open the door, ushering his fellow Seishi inside, and Chichiri let out an exclamation at the scrolls and books spread over every surface.

“You really have been busy, you know.” He murmured. “All of this — you’ve read through everything here?”

“Everything I could lay hands on. To keep my brain busy as much as anything.” Chiriko nodded his head, his hair bobbing as he did so. “And at last… I think I found something useful.”

“So the answer is here.” Hotohori pursed his lips. “In an ancient

text, stored in a Jouzen archive?"

"Or a more recent version of one, yes." Chiriko gestured to the table in front of him, opening the dusty book carefully as he did so. "Like I said, I noticed that the stars had changed — that was how I first knew you were all in danger from Amiboshi's flute, so I knew it was something important. When I realised Tamahome's stars had gone, it got me thinking about Sukunami Taka and the fact that people from this world are not meant to enter that world. And then I took it further."

He gestured to a diagram on the page, and his companions gathered around to peer at it.

Even with the age and intricacy of the design, it was clear that it was a map of the sky, divided into four, with seven constellations assigned to each of the beast Gods.

"There are twenty eight mansions of the heavens, divided into four Gods to represent four lands." Chiriko said carefully. "They're stars, of course, but they're also us — the warriors of Suzaku. We're, essentially, the stars' human form — if you want to take it that way."

"You mean we *are* made up of stars?" Tasuki gazed at his hands in disbelief, and Nuriko snorted, shaking his head slowly.

"And he's already lost." He observed with some amusement.

"Not exactly." Chiriko hid a smile of his own. 'Really, we're people, just like everyone else. Except that this world's designated each of us with some kind of stellar power — we're Suzaku's seven Seishi — that word alone means "celestial warrior', after all. The power each of us possesses is just a manifestation of the same relationship that exists between the seven mansions of Suzaku and the Beast God himself. That's all."

"Er. Ok." Tasuki nodded blankly, as Chichiri bent to skim over the contents of the page.

"I see." He said pensively. "So it's as we thought. What you're saying is that since Tamahome's no longer in this world, something's gone wrong with the natural order."

"Hey, how did we get from mansions and gods to your theory about Tamahome?" Tasuki demanded. "Did you switch pages when I wasn't looking? I thought we were still somewhere in the sky over Kounan."

He squinted at the paper, frowning.

"And you can read this stuff? It's all squiggles… half of these

characters don't make any sense!"

"No, they're just a little more complicated than your average writing. That's all." Chiriko shook his head. "I learnt to read a lot more when I was studying for the civil service exam."

"And *you* can read it, too?" Tasuki glanced at Chichiri, who nodded.

"It's fairly clear." He admitted. "I probably don't know as many characters as Chiriko does, but I can understand this without too much trouble."

He sent Tasuki a playful smile.

"I might have taken that exam myself, once upon a time — another lifetime ago." He added. "My people were involved in governmental business, after all — before the Shouryuu flood. The Ri family were quite important in the North at one time and they expected me to follow suit — I'm not just a pretty face, you know."

"Yeesh." Tasuki snorted. "What happened to learning life by livin' it, huh? Friggin' bookworms, the pair of you."

"But if it answers our questions, then it's a good thing, you know." Chichiri grinned. "Think about it. We know Tamahome's stars are no longer there. We know Tamahome is no longer here, and that Sou Kishuku doesn't exist in this world any more. Everything that's happened since — it looks like maybe Chiriko's dug up the basic reason behind it."

"I think I have." Chiriko turned over a few pages, running his finger along the edge of a specific paragraph. "Chichiri-san, take a look at this. It's the legend of the Miko — almost as we understand it."

"*The Priestesses come from another world, by way of kibon. The seven stars of Suzaku exist within the world, as pillars of the southern sky. The Miko comes to unite the stars and summon the Beast God, through whom the land can be granted eternal peace*."

Chichiri read it out slowly, pursing his lips as he considered its meaning.

"Kibon?" Nuriko arched his head over Chiriko's head to see, frowning. "What is that? Some kind of magic from Miaka's world that we don't know anything about?"

"Yes and no." Chiriko frowned. "It took me a while, but I think I cracked it. I've read the legend of the Miko a thousand times. I was always so terrified of being one of the Suzaku Seishi, because I didn't

wholly understand what I'd have to do — only that it would involve fighting and sometimes I felt so weak and useless. So I'd read and re-read in the hopes that I'd understand it. When I read it then, though, I glossed over the meaning of that word. I made a basic assumption about it, just as you did, Nuriko — that it was some kind of magic that we didn't understand — something from Miaka's world, that enabled the Miko to cross planes and enter here. I suppose I thought of her as some kind of divine spirit — some kind of higher being, with that kind of power."

He looked rueful, and Nuriko laughed.

"Miaka's divine power was to be able to consume six dishes at one sitting…" He said ruefully. "I don't think that's quite what you mean."

"Well, since I've been back here, I've needed something to keep my brain busy. If my mind is focused and occupied, the fears don't return." Chiriko said matter-of-factly. "And I got to analysing this properly for the first time. I really absorbed what it meant — Ki Bon. Ki, meaning spirit. Hon, meaning basis, or foundation. This isn't something belonging to Miaka's world, but it's something here — something which upholds everything that we understand and live around. Kibon is the spiritual foundation of our world — the overriding and underlying power that drives life and existence, even of Taiitsukun and Taikyoku-zan."

"So this world really *is* the one causing all of this? The world on its own, somehow?" Nuriko demanded. Chiriko nodded.

"Basically." He agreed. "It's confined Taiitsukun, no doubt, to try and prevent any further breakdowns in accepted order. She is the controller of this world — she provided the scrolls that helped the Miko summon the four Gods and she has an intrinsic connection with its inner workings. But why would she do all of that? Why go to the trouble of giving these scrolls, of needing the Gods, or any of these things? And reading this, it hit me. Taiitsukun is controller — but the world itself is founded on a greater power than even hers. It is the *world*'s bidding that Taiitsukun is driven to do — to assemble us and stabilise its power base once and for all. To make sure this world continues to exist, even beyond the adventures of the Miko — all four Gods must be summoned, all four lands must be saved. And all twenty eight stellar mansions must reside within the Shijin-Tenchishou."

He shrugged his shoulders, offering a sober smile.

"But we all know that now, one of those twenty eight mansions is missing." He continued. "It's like removing a cornerstone from a

building. It wobbles and shakes and then it falls down. Without Tamahome, this world's entire existence is in peril. Kibon has been upset… and that's why everything has been haywire."

"So we find this Kibon person and what, we reason with them?" Tasuki asked.

"Kibon isn't a person, Tasuki. Kibon is an entity. A core part of our existence." Chichiri explained, and Tasuki's brows drew together.

"The kid just said that Kibon has been upset." He objected. "What did he mean, then, if not that?"

"Tasuki's imagining some damsel in distress waiting to be rescued." Nuriko snorted, and Tasuki grimaced.

"You might be dead but I can hit you while you're in this body." He warned. "Just explain to me what's going on, all right? I was with you right up until Chiriko started talking about mansions, but then everything got a bit confused."

"Chiriko means that Kounan — and the other realms of Sairou, Kutou and Hokkan — exist because of this energy known as kibon." Hotohori said gravely. "That this is what makes our world exist in the way that we understand. It is through that power that Miaka was brought here — because this world needed her and her kind to maintain stability and existance… and it is also this power which controls our fate and our destinies, enables our world to live and even chose us to be the warriors of Suzaku in the first place."

"His Highness is right." Chiriko agreed. "Exactly that."

"Do you get it now?" Chichiri cast Tasuki a glance, and the redhead sighed.

"Not really, but go on." He said resignedly. "Just tell me who to burn and when and I'll do it, okay? I'll leave the bookworm stuff to you people — it all seems like a lot of gibberish to me."

"If this power has been upset, then somehow we must restore the balance." Mitsukake put in thoughtfully. "But Tamahome is no longer in this world. And we can't get to Miaka's world."

"Plus, it would be unfair to drag him back from there now that they are together in her world." Hotohori added. "Taiitsukun said that they would be able to exist in any world, now. Clearly she must have assumed that this — whatever regulates this — had been overcome somehow with the invention of Sukunami Taka. Otherwise, why did this not happen a lot sooner?"

“Because Tamahome was still here.” Chichiri said softly. “When he went to Miaka’s world, he had to shed his memories. They stayed behind, and acted in his place. We all know that Tenkou was able to utilise this to his own ends, manipulating a part of Tamahome’s soul by possessing those seven stones. To beat Tenkou, Taka and Tamahome’s memories fused together into one person. But that person is no longer here. And therein begins the problem.”

“There is one other thing I realised, when I was reading this.” Chiriko added, gesturing to the paragraph again. “It reminded me of something else Miaka said, which is why I’m certain I’m on the right track.”

He tapped his nail against the second character of ‘*kibon*’.

“Hon also reads as ‘book’.” He said quietly. “Isn’t it true that Miaka-san’s doorway to our world… was in the form of a book in hers? An enchanted book, that somehow connected her world to our own?”

“So kibon could be the spirit of the book, then.” Hotohori reflected. Chiriko shrugged.

“It could… I don’t know.”

“So how do we fix this, then?” Nuriko demanded. “Can we fix it? We can’t bring Tama back, that’s a closed door. We don’t have his memories here — another brick wall. What can we do? If the problem is that Tama isn’t here any more — how do we handle that?”

“And if it’s so important for us to be here, why are you guys dead?” Tasuki demanded, gesturing at Nuriko and the others with the end of his tessen.

“We’re still here, though. And we will be reborn.” Hotohori murmured. “Don’t you remember? Anzu said it already. That Saihitei was dead but Hotohori was not — and in the end, perhaps she’s more right than even she knew. Seven souls… seven stars… seven pillars of the southern sky. Our very existence is key, isn’t it? The seven of us, as souls, as spirits — our physical form is secondary. We are here — perhaps we have always been here, even before these incarnations. For all we know, the legend may have already been told, and we just have no memory of those meetings, or those battles. Perhaps to sustain itself, this world must bring to the fore the Seishi of each land to strengthen its existence and stabilise it for further generations of peace. Our connection to one another is strong — and to Suzaku no Miko, too. Remember, the Miko comes when the country faces collapse — or maybe, she comes when the spiritual energy that sustains it is low. So long as she comes to this world to unite us, and

so long as we exist here, the cycle can begin again. That is why we were able to return as spirits beyond death to assist Miaka. We are not like other souls… and perhaps that is why it was Miaka who was brought into this book. Because her soul is key too — she is always Suzaku no Miko, just as we are always Suzaku Shichi Seishi. Time goes on, lives begin and end. But we, as entities — we endure."

"What do you mean?" Nuriko looked startled. "That… *we*… are kibon? That *we*… are the power of this world?"

"His Highness might well be right." Chichiri said grimly. "That the Seishi are, when you take into account all twenty eight, in all four sectors of the sky… that it is we who keeps this world alive. Not the Miko, not Taiitsukun, not some divine power. But the stars — the constellations. The twenty eight mansions that make up the sky. And that Miaka — and the other Miko — act as catalysts, drawing those constellations out, honing their strength, summoning the Beast God — all so this world can continue to exist in the way it always has. For our part, it's the stability of Kounan that rests on our shoulders — but the same probably applies in Hokkan, Sairou and Kutou. And *that's* why Byakko did not grant Suzuno-sama and Tatara that wish."

"Shit." Tasuki let out his breath in a rush. "Are you serious? This world is running on *us*?"

"And now it's like a cart missing a wheel." Hotohori said slowly. "Tamahome is not here… so the world cannot function as normal."

"And the rest of us take the strain, because more of our strength is being used to try and keep things going." Nuriko's eyes widened. "Which is why everything's so unsettled!"

"Our fears and doubts, our memories, our very selves have been called into question by the absence of Tamahome's spirit." Hotohori frowned. "Are we truly that linked as Seishi, then?"

"It's something we ought to consider." Chichiri sighed. "Think about it. Just to use one example — when Nuriko was wounded, and when he died, only Tamahome and Miaka were with him. But we *all* felt it. Even you, Your Highness, at the palace in Eiyou. You weren't even within the same country borders — and yet, even then, you knew. We *are* tied to one another. It's a bond that we'll never be able to break."

"I'm touched." An ironic smile twitched at the corners of Nuriko's mouth.

"So what do we do about it, then?" Tasuki demanded. "This is all

very well, but it's still all talking. When are we actually going to get some action, huh? Places like this give me the creeps anyway… far too many books!"

"Restore the constellation of Tamahome." Chiriko rolled up the scroll, setting it aside. "It's the only thing we can do. We can't refer to Taiitsukun or Suzaku, and we can't call on Miaka-san. So it's down to us to do."

"But that's impossible." Nuriko objected. "Tamahome isn't here… right? He and Miaka-no-baka are in the other world, and we can't get there. They can only come here. We've already said that."

"Well… perhaps he is." Mitsukake said quietly.

"Mitsukake?" Hotohori sent him a startled glance, and the gentle physician smiled.

"It occured to me, as you were talking." He said in his soft, measured tones, "That Tamahome has not truly left this world after all. If Chichiri is right, Tamahome's memories were enough to sustain his presence in the sky over Kounan. That it was this proof of his existance that kept him a part of Kounan's foundation, and therefore kept everything in balance. It is not the person of Tamahome that is important, but the spirit of his existance. His constellation in the southern sky — the proof that he is real."

"Meaning…?" Nuriko pursed his lips. "Tamahome's memories aren't here any more, either. They're inside Sukunami Taka."

"But our memories… are inside of us." Mitsukake said deliberately. "Our memories of Tamahome, and the encounters we shared."

Chiriko's eyes widened, and slowly he nodded.

"Mitsukake's right." He exclaimed, making Tasuki jump and almost fall backwards into one of the old bookcases. "If Tamahome's memories were enough to keep balance, why shouldn't it work for us, too?"

"Our memories of Tamahome?" Nuriko said thoughtfully. "Could that really fool this world into thinking he's still here?"

"But in a sense, he is. Just like Mitsukake said." Hotohori's eyes narrowed. "If we were able, somehow, to manifest those memories with our life force… into something… more powerful…"

"The shrine of Suzaku." Chichiri said with a grin. "That seems like the perfect place, you know? I think it could work. When I think about it, we are still linked to Tamahome. When we fought in Miaka's world,

and when Tamahome defeated Nakago, he carried each of us with him into that battle. We pooled our spirits and our energy then, so that he could succeed in saving Miaka's world and our own, too. I think it's probably true that we've never been fully separate, you know? That like the stars, we're all bound together by the shadow of Suzaku. But in that moment we became one entity. We combined everything we had. And it must have left its mark inside of each of us. There's a piece of Tamahome in all of us. Just as there are bits of us in him, wherever he is. Maybe they exist as memories, like Mitsukake said — it's probably the most tangible way of looking at it. But if we could combine our strength — somehow focus that energy and those feelings into Suzaku's shrine, I think… it might be enough to create a… a sort of spirit of Tamahome, if you like. A proof that Sou Kishuku did exist, and so did Suzaku's seventh warrior."

"But if his spirit isn't in this world, Tamahome won't be reborn." Nuriko objected. "If Hotohori-sama is right about our souls being connected time and time again, what about that?"

"Sukunami Taka lives in Miaka's world." Chichiri said simply. "But the spirit of Tamahome belongs in this world, and probably always will. When Sukunami Taka dies, I expect Tamahome will be reborn in *this* world, not in Miaka's. If she *is* perpetually our Priestess, then she will always be reborn in that one. But it is one human form which Taiitsukun and Suzaku created, not one soul. Tamahome's soul fills Taka's body — to enable him to spend *this* lifetime alongside Miaka… not forever. Perhaps they are destined to meet, time and time again, but this is still a special circumstance."

He nodded.

"I think it would be enough, you know. To keep our world from collapsing, anyway."

"Well, we can stand here or we can give it a try." Tasuki said brusquely. "I'm still not totally sure what you guys are talking about, but if it's got a chance of working, I'm all for it."

"Then I suppose we're going to the palace. To my final resting place, within the shrine of Suzaku." A faint shadow flickered across Hotohori's face at this, and Nuriko cast him a smile, resting a hand reassuringly on his arm.

"It's up to you whether you let Houki see you." He said quietly. "But either way, Heika, this will be the last time. After this, you, and I, and Chiriko and Mitsukake -we get to start again… we have to leave our regrets behind, if we're going to be able to do that."

“I know. And I will.” Hotohori nodded. He sighed, glancing at his hands.

“In the end, Suzaku’s work came before everything else. For each of us, this has been the case.” He reflected. “I suppose our fates really have been written in the stars. When I was a boy, my advisors more or less told me that I was fated to fight and die for Suzaku no Miko… and in the end, they were proven right. I was prepared for that — I think, in the end, we all were. But to leave a wife and child was a bittersweet factor I hadn’t considered. Maybe that is why I did not want to marry.”

“Boushin will be fine. He has plenty of his father in him.” Chichiri said wisely. “And you needn’t worry, Hotohori-sama. I give you my word that I’ll visit Houki and the young Emperor often, and make sure they’re both doing well. It’ll be a pleasure — and I’m sure Houki-sama won’t let him grow up without knowing how brave his father was as Emperor. He has a lot to live up to — that’s for sure.”

Hotohori looked startled, then he smiled.

“An Emperor must give everything for his country, even if it costs him his contentment and his life.” He reflected with a shrug of his shoulders. “But I was lucky enough to have had happiness too, even if it was brief. Thank you, Chichiri. I would like it, if you would visit my widow and son and ensure their continued health, even after I can’t see them any more. If I know that, then I can do as Nuriko says… when the time comes, I can relinquish this existance completely, and await the next.”

“It’s gonna be a whole lot of a bummer, isn’t it, at the end of the day.” Tasuki twitched his tessen thoughtfully. “We’re doing this so that the world is right again, and you people can be reborn. But that means no more Suzaku Shichi Seishi, doesn’t it? At least, not in this life. It really sucks… then there really will only be Chichiri and I left, won’t there?”

“Don’t worry, Tasuki-chan.” Nuriko’s eyes twinkled. “When I get old enough, I’ll be sure to visit Reikaku-zan and see you as a doddery old man.”

“You might not remember that Reikaku-zan exists.” Chiriko said seriously. “There’s a very real possibility that, when we are reborn, we won’t remember any of these things at all.”

“Then we should do our best to make sure we share as many memories as we can with Suzaku’s shrine. Just in case, like Tamahome, we need them again one day.” Nuriko said pragmatically.

“Either way, this is what we must do.” Mitsukake added. “Even without Miaka, we exist to help people. Don’t we?”

“We do.” Chichiri nodded his head. “And that means we need to get to Suzaku’s shrine as soon as possible, you know.”

Chapter 23

Chapter Twenty Two

Night was falling by the time the Suzaku Seishi arrived in Eiyou, and the moon was already climbing high in the sky over the capital city as they entered through the main gates. They had decided to make the short journey on horseback, despite Chichiri's protests that he could handle another transportation, and consequently Aidou, Anzu and Tamatama had ridden with them, making it a party of eight who approached the Kounan royal palace.

As they abandoned their horses, Hotohori gazed up at the familiar columns of his former home, and a flicker of regret surfaced in his goldish eyes.

"For the last time, I fear." He murmured, more than half to himself, and Mitsukake laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Not an ending. A new beginning." He said softly, and Hotohori started, sending his friend a smile. He nodded.

"Indeed." He agreed. "But… to enter, must we not disturb the palace guard? And Houki… Houki may…"

He faltered, and Chichiri shook his head.

"It's all right, you know." He said with a grin. "I'll use my magic to get us into the shrine. Noone need see us at all — I think it's better they don't see you, Heika, considering how badly you scared that poor boy the other night."

"You've already been told once, Chichiri — lay off the magic until we're inside the shrine." Nuriko eyed him severely, shaking his head. "You almost drained yourself getting us to Jouzen and you can't keep pushing yourself over the limit. We don't know what power any of us needs to do this — or if we even can… if the likeness of Suzaku is enough of a medium for us to use to try and recreate Tamahome's 'existance'. But it's no good if you wipe out before we even get to that point. We'll go through the gate. I'll speak to them. It's no problem… they'll let us in."

"You're dead, Nuriko." Tasuki eyed him doubtfully. "What are you going to do?"

"No violence." Hotohori held up his hands. "I will not disrupt my

son's sleep with reckless breaking and entering. If we must use the gate, then I insist we find some way of doing it which doesn't require Nuriko to use his strength."

"I wasn't going to use my strength." Nuriko said with a grin. "Look at me. In this light, Hotohori-sama — and if I was to be cloaked and hooded — who might I be, do you think? Dressed this way — in Tamatama's fine silks?"

Hotohori's eyes widened, and Nuriko dimpled.

"I'm hurt." He bantered. "Are you so in love with Houki now that you forget she and I, we have a lot in common in terms of appearance?"

"Noone will ever believe you're the dowager empress, you moron." Tasuki snorted. "Come on. You might look kind of alike, but they're going to notice that you're flat-chested, to begin with. You're *not* a woman, even if you prance around like one — *that's* the material difference."

"Tasuki-chan, noone is going to be looking at my chest." Nuriko said sweetly. "I'm simply going to act as a diversion. Nothing else. Although Anzu, you should probably give him a slap for speaking that way… doesn't it bother you that he's talking about other women's breasts when he's meant to be with you?"

"Tasuki-san?" Chiriko's eyes became big, and Tasuki reddened, clapping his hands over Chiriko's ears as colour rose in Anzu's cheeks, also.

"Shut up. It's not that way." He protested, even as Chiriko wrestled himself free of the bandit's grip. "I was just saying, Houki's a woman and you're a man."

"Not like this I'm not." Nuriko shook his head. He cast Tamatama a questioning glance, and Tamatama grinned, nodding.

"You look like a girl to me." He said lightly.

"Well, if it will prevent a fight." Hotohori sighed. "Nuriko, promise me that you will do nothing to dishonour my widow's good reputation in all of this, will you?"

"Relax." Nuriko said firmly, even as Anzu unwound her cloak from her shoulders, handing it to the Seishi to better disguise his face. "Houki and I are old friends. Bosom buddies from halcyon harem days. And we have changed places before — on more than one interesting occasion. I did pick her out for you, after all — you should

trust me to be able to pull off the Dowager Empress, if I was able to pull off Chou Kourin for eight years."

He adjusted the hood slightly to conceal his shorn hair, then nodded.

"All right. I'm ready." He said briskly. "Give me five minutes or so. I'll pull them away from the gate… you head for the shrine. I'll join you just as soon as I'm able."

He winked.

"I won't be long."

"Do you think he really can do it?" Tasuki looked doubtful.

"Well, if anyone can, it's Nuriko, you know." Chichiri rubbed his chin. "Although I wish you would all stop fussing about my magic. It's fine now. Thanks to Mitsukake's power and the time in Jouzen away from that northern atmosphere, I'm quite all right… living bodies recover more quickly than dead ones, after all… I could have got us in there just fine."

"No use in arguing about it now." Hotohori said heavily. "We should enter."

"What about us?" Anzu asked softly. "We can't… enter the shrine of Suzaku… can we?"

"You're going to have to." Tasuki said frankly. "Think we're leaving two women and a wannabe-woman out here in the dark in the middle of Eiyou where anyone could be hanging around? Get real. This ain't the mountains — this is Eiyou. And besides, when Nuriko's done playing with the palace guard, they'll come back and want to know why you're hanging around here. You'd be better coming in. It'd be safer that way."

"Tasuki's right, you know." Chichiri agreed. "Even if it is unorthodox, you'll have to come at least as far as the outer chamber. Otherwise it might be dangerous."

"They've gone." Chiriko whispered, peering across towards where the armoured soldiers had been standing just a moment or two before. "Nuriko-san's either convinced them or he's been arrested. Either way, the coast is clear now."

"Then we shouldn't waste time." Mitsukake said gravely. "We should go and let him."

"Yes… but quietly." Chichiri warned. "Tasuki, you should just not

speak till we get there, in fact. Your voice carries… and we don't want to be found out just yet."

"What do you mean, I should just not speak!?" Tasuki protested, but Anzu grabbed him by the arm, shaking her head.

"Do as he says." She pleaded. "I don't want to wind up in an imperial dungeon — do you?"

"We wouldn't. We're Seishi. Houki already gave us leave to move around the palace." Tasuki pointed out.

"Yes, but by the time such formalities are smoothed out it might be too late for the north, you know?" Chichiri shook his head. "You might not care, but it bothers me if the Shouryuu floods again — and our job is to protect all the people in Kounan. Not just the ones who live around your mountain. Just hold your tongue a while, all right? We'll be in before you know it."

Tasuki grimaced, but obediently fell silent, and the group crept cautiously between the ornate columns, making their way across the palace complex to the shrine of Suzaku. As they reached the entrance, Chichiri paused, his expression twitching slightly as he used a flicker of magic to unfasten the lock. Then he pushed the door open, gesturing for his companions to follow.

"It's dark in here." Chiriko whispered. "Tasuki-san, if you used your tessen to light the torches, we'd be able to see where we were going a little more clearly."

"On it." Tasuki nodded, pulling his harisen from his back and flicking it in the direction of each of the wooden torches that hung in wall-sconces along their way. "There. Better now?"

"You do take your time." A voice startled them from the darkness, and Anzu gasped, almost tripping over her own feet at the sudden sound. She fell against Tasuki, who pulled her roughly to her feet with a whispered curse, and there was a laugh from the blackness as a figure stepped into the flame-light.

"You're all so jumpy. Don't you have faith in me?" Nuriko eyed them playfully. "I told you I'd get them away… and that I'd meet you here."

"What did you say to them?" Hotohori looked suspicious, and Nuriko chuckled.

"So untrusting." He chided. "Nothing terrible at all. I told the guards I was worried that I'd seen strangers heading for Prince

Boushin's chamber. That's all. I acted the frightened, worried mother. In their panic to check on the boy, none of them stopped to wonder why Lady Houki was walking around the place like that… I suppose they don't want to lose another Emperor."

Hotohori sighed, shaking his head.

"I have left a heavy weight on his head." He admitted. "But I suppose… it is good to know that even at the murmur of danger, my son's life is constantly protected."

"And it worked, you know. We got in just fine." Chichiri looked approving. "All right. Anzu, Aidou, Tamatama-san… the next door leads to the inner sanctum of Suzaku's shrine, where the beast God's statue stands. It… I don't know what we might do, to combine our powers and bring things to rights. It might be… dangerous, if you were to go beyond this point. I think you should be safe enough here, though."

"Will you be… coming out again?" Aidou asked uncertainly, and Chichiri laughed, nodding his head.

"I imagine so." He agreed. "At least, Tasuki and I will. If all goes according to plan… well, who knows what else might happen. But yes… don't look so worried, Aidou. Nothing's going to happen to your brother — even despite last night's fever I think he has more life in him than any of us."

"You better believe it." Tasuki nodded. "It takes a hell of a lot to kill Genrou, and that's a fact."

"This is where we part ways, though, isn't it, Kourin?" Tamatama said softly, and Nuriko turned, opening his lips as if to protest at the use of his sister's name. At his friend's expression, however, the words died unspoken and instead he frowned, nodding slowly.

"Perhaps." He admitted cautiously. "If… if we succeed, then I suppose… everything will go back to how it was before. I mean… how it should be. And what was interrupted… I suppose we'll be reborn. Won't we?"

"I would think so." Chiriko nodded his head. "That's my thinking, anyhow. That all of this is the world trying to fix itself, and using us to help do it. While our powers are at their strongest, the world can stabilise and exist. That's why it needs us in the forms we are now — but when that's done — once this world is safe again — we have new lives to begin and there'll be nothing to stop us beginning them."

Tamatama bit his lip, then he hugged his friend tightly, taking him

off guard.

“Then I’ll wish you luck.” He said quietly. “For everything you have to do as Nuriko, but also for the next life, just in case it is the last time I’ll see you. I won’t forget you, Kou… Nuriko, I promise you that. Even if you don’t remember Yukigase or Yukiyasha or any of those things — I’ll always remember them, and that I had a friend once who was one of a kind — even beyond death. So make sure you choose the best damn new life you can, all right? Because after all of the things you’ve done — and been — you deserve it.”

“Tamatama.” Tears glistened in Nuriko’s eyes, and he nodded his head. “I will. I promise.”

He grinned, looking sheepish.

“You taught me to look pretty enough to fool an Emperor, after all.” He said lightly. “I appreciate everything, you know that. I hope… I hope you find Tenbun, in the city, and tell him everything he doesn’t already know. And tell him that I’ll say hi to Byakuren for him, too — I promise. Wherever I end up — I’m going to make sure I live my life this time… that I don’t throw it away because of regrets and other things I didn’t understand. Your faith in me helped me recover myself as much as Kourin’s or these guys, really — you’ve helped save Kounan too, this time. Tell Tenbun that. I’m sure he’ll be happy, when he knows.”

I don’t think anyone who’s met any of you will ever be able to forget. “Aidou said reflectively, and Anzu nodded, casting Hotohori a sad smile as she dashed away her own tears.

“I promise to keep practicing with a sword, even though you didn’t get to teach me as much as I’d have liked.” She said quietly. “I wish I’d known you when you were alive, Hotohori-sama — but I’m glad I got to meet you, even like this. And I will keep practicing. I swear.”

“So long as you have faith in your spirit, that’s enough.” Hotohori smiled at her. “It’s all about that, and you have a strong spirit, Anzu-chan. It will take you far.”

“So are we going in already, or are we all going to stand around crying?” Tasuki asked bluntly, and Chichiri laughed.

“We’re going in.” He said evenly. “Tasuki’s right. We’re wasting time.”

With that he pushed his hands firmly against the door of the inner sanctum, and they slid apart, revealing the shadow of the Beast God’s statue looming in the darkness.

“Well, we’re here.” He said unecessarily, as Chiriko carefully closed the screen behind them. “Just like we’ve been before, with the God watching over us. Tasuki-san, lights, if you please?”

“With pleasure.” Tasuki flexed his tessen once more, and the room was illuminated in the warm glow of his flame.

“It feels a little strange to be standing inches from my own gravesite.” Hotohori eyed the foot of the statue doubtfully. “I’m not sure it’s a sensation I like. What we’re going to do — it isn’t going to, well, dig me up, is it? It isn’t that I’m afraid of meeting my own mortality, but I really don’t want to see what time has done to my body, encased in such a place.”

He shivered involuntarily.

“All that talk about decomposition earlier on was enough.” He admitted. “I’d like to go on to my next life remembering that I was beautiful, not with an image of a half-decaying corpse.”

“Believe me, none of us want to see that.” Tasuki pulled a graphic face. “Don’t worry. We ain’t digging anyone up. I promise.”

“But we are going to use the statue as our medium?” Nuriko questioned, eying it pensively. “Do you think we can do it? If this world is running on us — if Kounan is starting to break down because the strain is too much for us to handle alone — can we really use this thing to project Tamahome back into the stellar atmosphere?”

Chichiri pursed his lips, running a tentative finger over the underside of the bird’s wing.

“Suzaku is the God of love and the God of rebirth.” He said softly. “As well as being the Guardian of Kounan. Everything that’s happened… has been to do with us. Our bond. Our connection. The six of us, plus Tamahome, even if he isn’t here any more. We all know that there aren’t Suzaku warriors without Tamahome… we’ve all mentioned him at one point or another, during the last few days. He’s still in our thoughts, as Mitsukake says. And when you stop and think about it, it’s the connection we share that has allowed you to come back in the forms you are now. The bond we have with each other and with Miaka helped you to fight Nakago and combine all of our spirits into Tamahome’s body to help save Miaka’s world. In that moment, we were one being. One stellar sky — we were Suzaku’s power. And we… we were kibon. The spirit of this world.”

He frowned.

“It makes a strange kind of sense, when you review it.” He added.

“The legends of the Miko aren’t meant to play out at the same time — the world calls to them one by one so that they can heal and strengthen each land in turn. Things went awry when Yui-sama was called here at the same time as Miaka — the two stories played out against one another, creating conflict and uncertainty and war between our lands. That’s not the purpose of the Priestess or the Warriors, at the end of the day, you know? We’re here to protect our lands, not harm the others. But fighting that war… just made us stronger in terms of our links to one another. It didn’t break us down — it consolidated our strength. And that’s why I think we can make this work, you know. Tamahome is here. Inside all of us. And even if he lives in Miaka’s world now — he’s still a Suzaku warrior, just as we are.”

“All the memories we have, and all our feelings and thoughts towards Tamahome… those are the things we need to draw on.” Chiriko added. “With as much strength as we can. He was a man of Suzaku too. One of the Beast God’s servants. That’s why it needs to be here, in the shrine, where we first tried to summon Suzaku. Miaka-san didn’t leave Kounan with a Shinzahou — whatever it was, it must have stayed in her world when we all left there. But we do still have this place to go to — it’s as close to Suzaku as we can get, without summoning him again.”

“I think Miaka’s Shinzahou isn’t something we can touch. I think it’s something intangible.” Chichiri admitted. “Which is why I’m sure this will work. I think her Shinzahou is based in love — and the faith she had in all of us.”

“And she’d want us to keep faith now, wouldn’t she?” Nuriko mused, his eyes softening as he reflected on the monk’s words. ‘That’s what she’d be saying, with that wide, silly grin of hers and those big, guileless eyes. “*Just do your best — I believe you can*.’ That’s what Miaka’d say now.”

“Even without Miaka, we’re still Shichi Seishi.” Mitsukake reflected. “Even dead, even flung into strange places, bereft of our memories. We’re still tied to one another, and it’s that tie that made us able to remember things again. Memories are strong things, I think. Strong enough to even keep someone alive. My memories of Shouka keep her with me all the time. Chichiri, I’m sure you feel the same about Koran and Hikou. Nuriko, you’ve never forgotten your sister… we all carry those things with us. Those are the things that make us real, aren’t they?”

“I’m starting to lose the plot here.” Tasuki objected. “I thought we

were doing some kind of magic with the bird statue here… not reminiscing about dead people with, well, other dead people! I thought it was an emergency — are we just standing about now?"

"No, we're not." Chichiri shook his head, turning back to the statue as he cast a glance briefly around at the shrine walls. "I'm going to cast a spell over the statue… a strong one, I'm not going to hold back. All the strength I have left in me, in terms of my magic. I can't create life — none of us can do that. And I can't bring Sou Kishuku back from Sukunami Taka's body. But if I can create an aura of some sorts around Suzaku's form… if everyone concentrates their thoughts and memories on that… I can try and bind them together. And then, with all of us… I'm banking on the fact that this place is as strong as I think it is where Suzaku's power is concerned. That Miaka's Shinzahou really was a form of love, after all. What we're doing — more than bringing Tamahome's stars back to the southern sky — is restoring the balance of this world. All the negativity, all the doubt — we have to use our strength to drive that out. Anzu is the one who made that clear to me — when she helped drive the byouma out of Tasuki's body by simply believing in his strength to survive. We have to believe in this one hundred percent. Give one hundred percent… show that whatever plane of existance Tamahome currently lives in, *we* believe he's still with us here, in this world. And that whatever happens — he *always* will be."

"He always will be." Nuriko murmured, then nodded his head, bringing his hands together in prayer as his companions followed suit. "All right, Chichiri. Ready when you are."

Chichiri cast a glance around at his companions, seeing the same look of resolution on each face as he felt within his own heart. Then he brought his hand up before his face, closing his good eye as he focused his strength on the statue, encasing it in a reddish haze as he stabilised his spell.

"It's done." He said softly. "The world is waiting… let's put Tamahome's stars back in the Southern sky."

"Do you suppose they're all right in there?"

Anzu cast the closed door an apprehensive look, sinking down against the wall of the outer shrine complex as she let out a sigh. "I know Chichiri said… but I'm still worried. I mean, they're trying to save a whole country, aren't they? Maybe even the whole world. What if they can't? Or what if they wind up hurt? What if…?"

“What if you kept a little faith in them?” Aidou asked softly, and Anzu faltered, staring up at her companion with wide eyes. Aidou nodded.

“You had faith the other night, didn’t you? Faith to drive out a demon.” She said matter-of-factly. “Where’d that go?”

“I… I guess I still have faith.” Anzu admitted slowly. “I’m just… is it wrong to be scared for them? For Genrou, because I love him. For Chichiri, because he always understands and looks out for me — I know he does, like Raimon used to do. For Hotohori-sama, because he saved *my* life, and because I’m worried about him being able to start afresh in his own. For all of them, because of the fact one of them is missing. I… I just want them to be all right, that’s all.”

“We all do.” Tamatama said gravely. “Even if that means saying goodbye.”

“You and Nuriko are close, aren’t you?” Anzu glanced at him, and he nodded.

“Yes.” He said evenly. “And I won’t pretend I’m happy, letting her go like this. But for her — it’s the best thing. This time, she can be who she wants to be — not what Suzaku and her past made her become. Even when we first met, she had doubts and grief dictating her movements. I’d like her to be able to move past that, and live for herself.”

“You say ‘she’, but Nuriko’s a…”

“Nuriko is a woman in spirit, whatever form her body takes.” Tamatama shook his head. “You may or may not take me seriously, choosing to live this way — and I’ve reached a stage in my life when I really don’t care. I know all too well that you can be a woman without being a woman. Nuriko *is*. So yes. To me she’s still Kourin — to me she’s a she.”

“I suppose appearance really doesn’t matter.” Aidou said absently. “How someone looks… isn’t who they really are.”

“And when they’re reborn, they’ll choose their own new starts.” Tamatama nodded. “Whatever that entails. And Chichiri-san and Tasuki-san will do what we will — go on with these lives until it’s our turn to roll onto the next one. Life’s a much bigger thing than just breathing, eating and sleeping… Aidou-san is right… have faith.”

“I suppose so.” Anzu rested her chin in her hands. “I just feel helpless, being out here. Like there’s nothing we can do.”

“I think you already did enough.” Aidou’s lips twitched into a smile. “It’s their turn now. Hou Jun said that everyone was powerful in their own way — everyone’s contribution is important. You made yours last night, didn’t you? Against Shun’u’s fever.”

“Yes…” Anzu sighed. “All right. I get it. And I do believe in them, Aidou… I do. I just… I worry. That’s all.”

“I don’t think any of us aren’t worried.” Aidou admitted. “Even though I’ve accepted what my brother’s calling is, I’m still afraid for him. But I… I’ve decided that I’m going to try and have faith in his decisions, for a while. It hasn’t got him killed yet — and Hou Jun will look after him — I think in some ways he always has.”

Anzu was silent for a moment, mulling this over. Then she raised her gaze once more to the older woman, nodding her head.

“It’s easy to take life for granted, and just exist.” She said softly. “And I’ve had times when I’ve done that — just existed. Even times when I didn’t care if I was alive or dead. When I came to Kounan, the only thing that kept me going was the thought of Genrou and Reikaku-zan — the thought of finding someone who mattered to me again. I thought… if he died… I wouldn’t know how to carry on. I was that afraid of being alone, that I couldn’t bear the idea of him not being there. So I followed him, I put myself in danger — I didn’t think about protecting myself or my safety and if not for Hotohori-sama, I’d have been killed or something worse. It was silly. Being a child again… I thought that caring for Karin and everything else had made me so grown up, but maybe it hasn’t.”

She shrugged, getting to her feet.

“But I won’t leave him this time.” She reflected. “The truth is that now, I’m not staying with him because I’m afraid to be on my own, or because I’m clinging onto some memory from two years ago. I’m staying because I *do* love him — really and truly — and that matters to me most now. And if he died… I still… I still couldn’t bear it. But it’s for different reasons. Instead of saying I loved him and thinking I meant it, I know now that I *do* mean it.”

“Sometimes loving someone means letting them go.” Aidou reflected pensively, and Tamatama nodded.

“It does.” He agreed gravely. “Or making incredible sacrifices so that they can go on in peace or safety.”

“But I’m selfish.” Anzu admitted. “And if anything happens to Genrou — I don’t think… I can let him go.”

“Well, I don’t think it will.” Aidou said evenly, her gaze flitting back towards the closed door. “Besides, most people are selfish. Most people won’t make that kind of sacrifice — it’s just being human.”

She smiled slightly, a faintly ironic look in her bronzeish eyes.

“Besides, you’re not the only one who worries.” She murmured. “I do, too.”

“Well, he is your brother.” Anzu nodded. “I’m sorry, Aidou. I seem to fling my feelings at you when you’re feeling just as rough as me.”

Aidou looked startled for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“I don’t mind. It takes less courage to deal with your feelings than my own.” She said frankly. “And besides, it wasn’t what I meant. Shun’u… I’m not worried about Shun’u. I told you. I’m going to have faith in his ability to escape death like the slick bandit he is.”

“Then what do you mean?” Anzu looked startled. “If you’re not worrying about Genrou — then what?”

“Chichiri-san, I imagine.” Tamatama sat down heavily on the edge of the patterned walling, arranging his skirts fussily over his knees as he regarded the two women with some amusement.

“Chichiri…?” Anzu trailed off, her eyes widening as she took in the awkward flush of Aidou’s cheeks at Tamatama’s words. “You mean… Genrou was… *right*?”

“Shun’u wasn’t right about anything.” Aidou said firmly. “You know full well that Hou Jun was busy trying to save his life… my brother just has a filthy mind, from living too long with bandits.”

“No… but… that’s not…” Anzu faltered, then, “But he was right in that you… you *like* Chichiri… wasn’t he?”

Aidou did not answer, and Anzu bit her lip, unsure whether she had gone too far. It was Tamatama who broke the silence, offering Aidou a companionable grin as he did so.

“It’s no worse a thing, to love someone even if they love someone else.” He said lightly. “Even if they always do.”

“But I thought… didn’t you… in the war against Kutou?” Anzu was still struggling to digest this, and at this Aidou turned, a rueful smile touching her lips. She nodded.

“I did. Two years ago.” She agreed. “Which is when I decided to have nothing to do with men again. Outside my family, anyway. I’m too old to marry, and anything else is foolish. So no, Anzu, you can

entertain yourself all you like with romantic ideas. I'm a realist. So we won't speak about it again. Understood?"

"I… I won't say anything to him, or to Genrou." Anzu shook her head. "But I… I don't believe you mean that, Aidou. The look on your face… I think Tamatama-san is right. I think you *do* have feelings for Chichiri."

Aidou frowned, glancing at her hands.

"It's been a crazy few days. Things pass." She said briefly. "I wouldn't call it love. Admiration, maybe. Friendship, definitely. I have a lot of respect for him. But love? I don't think so. It's not sensible… and I'm not a fool."

"Ah, but you *are* a woman." Tamatama said wisely. "And there's no deceiving a female heart… even one like mine that beats in a male body. Tell yourself that all you like, my dear — it won't do you any good."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I understand, because I'm fated the same way." He said regretfully. "I've loved two men, and both have left me. It's hard, but a girl's heart has to recover and soldier on. No matter how scarred it gets — it can always find a way to love again. No matter what."

"*Two* men?" Anzu stared, then, "Was one… Nuriko?"

Tamatama grinned, winking at the young acrobat playfully.

"As a man or as a woman, there was always plenty to love about Nuriko." He agreed. "But it was quite unrequited. And she, in her turn, was fated to love Hotohori-sama — and love him without ever having it returned, either. Such is the cruel wheel of a girl's love for a man, when it plays itself out… even when all hope seems gone, it keeps on going."

"You talk rubbish." Aidou got to her feet, moving restlessly to the window of the chamber. "You don't know me, so you don't know anything about my heart or what it does or doesn't do. I may admire him. I don't pretend otherwise. But I am *not* in love with Hou Jun or any man — I'm not that stupid. So drop the subject… I won't discuss this any more. When we get back to the mountain, I have a father to care for, a mother to help, and a future and a village to worry about. I don't know where I'll live, let alone anything else at the moment. Silly, girlish fancies ain't anywhere near the top of my mind."

Anzu bit her lip, but registering the look on her companion's face,

obediently fell silent. Her mind whirled, however, and as she met Tamatama's gaze, the brawny transvestite shrugged his shoulders, giving her a knowing look.

"Genrou was jumping to mad conclusions, but there was something in it, after all." She murmured to herself, huddling up against the wall as she considered. "Does Chichiri know? Would he let on, if he did? Somehow, I don't think he would… he understands people so well, that I think… no, I know that he'd say nothing at all, even if it was obvious from the start. But… but it wasn't obvious to me. No wonder she's so tense — my heart is pulling for one man I love, but hers… hers is pulling for two."

She hesitated, then put her hands together, closing her eyes as she focused a heartfelt, inward prayer to the Beast God.

"Keep them safe, Suzaku." She whispered. "Keep them strong and let them save Kounan — *please*!"

Chapter 24

Chapter Twenty Three

For a moment, the inside of the Suzaku Shrine shimmered with red light, as the prayers of the six gathered Seishi flared out around each of their bodies, surging forwards towards the statue that Chichiri's spell glittered around. The monk's concentration had been absolute, and as Tasuki closed his eyes, he focused his thoughts on his missing Seishi companion.

"Tama." He murmured, and in a moment images began to play out in his mind's eye. Beneath the shade of a tall tree, cloaked in the darkness of night, two men had faced one another, blood spilling from the brow of one, and the other cold and clinical, missing the hot red mark of the ogre burning across his brow. It had almost been a fight to the death, and yet, even despite that first, kodoku-induced encounter, Tasuki knew that he had come to respect Tamahome as much as he did any of his bandit brethren.

"When Miaka… when I… you didn't stop believing in me." He mused, aware of the cold wetness of tears beginning to trickle down his cheeks as he reaffirmed his efforts. The memories of the assault on the Miko flooded his brain, but he drove them into their proper place, remembering instead the call of a friend who had sought to save his life.

"This time we're doin' it for you, buddy." He realised. "Else otherwise, somehow, this world is gonna die. An' if it dies, I don't know… maybe you won't be able to exist either. Or… or somethin' might call you back here, an' I swore… like we all did… that we'd do what we could to keep you an' Miaka together. I decided then that my life belonged to you two. Well… well, now, I'm provin' it. I ain't goin' to die for you — that's not what its about, I know that now. I ain't meant to die for Suzaku — I'm meant to live. But if my life *already* lived — my memories — an' everyone else's — if they make you real in this world again… then that's what I'm gonna focus on. No matter how much of my strength it takes… the pieces of that life will become yours. Jus' like Chichiri said… we're connected."

Chichiri murmured a second incantation at that moment, bringing his hands sharply together and with a sudden burst of red light, something soared above them, the brightness and warmth of the glow

making the startled bandit open his eyes. A ghostly form of a bird spread it's wings above them, as if drawn from the statue itself, arcing and wheeling over their heads as little by little, it gained a more substantial form.

"Suzaku." He whispered, for a moment believing that somehow their prayers had managed to summon the beast God itself. Then, as out of the corner of his eye he saw Chichiri's fingers flex again, he drew breath sharply, realising that it was the culmination of his friend's spell, drawn together in the form of the one they had all been born to serve.

"Shit." He murmured.

"Keep your concentration!" Chichiri exclaimed. "Don't falter… If you do, I won't be able to hold it — keep your mind on what you're doing, you know!"

Tasuki started, then obediently closed his eyes once more, returning his focus to the many times he and Tamahome had sparred over trivial things — the spats of brothers in arms — and as he relived them one by one, a smile touched his lips.

"You an' Miaka stay safe in her world." He decided firmly. "We might not get to meet again, but it don't matter… you're still here in this world, Tama. *You're still here!*"

Almost as if it had heard his thoughts, the ghostly bird stretched its wings full span, hovering above them as it glittered and shimmered, bouncing light off the golden statue which seemed dull and tarnished in comparison to the ethereal glow. As Tasuki cautiously opened one eye to peer at it, he saw the "oni" character weave its way slowly across the bird's chest, shining with a dazzling white light. Then, as the bird arched its neck, opening its beak as if to send out a ghostly call, a flare of energy shot from within it up towards the roof of the shrine, blazing through the timbers and plasters as it zoomed up towards the heavens. With a flick of its wings, the spectral bird followed the path of it's self-made comet, disappearing into the blackness above. From all around the palace, there was the sound of guards shouting and people hurrying around, startled and dismayed by the sudden appearance of the beast god in the sky.

"Shit, we broke the palace roof!" Despite himself, Tasuki's eyes opened wide with alarm. "They're gonna know we're here for sure, now — Chichiri, what kind of aim was that, you idiot? I thought we were keeping a low profile!"

"It doesn't matter now, you know." Chichiri said with a tired grin,

slowly lowering his hands as he gazed up towards the hole in the roof. “Look… look above. To the sky. *Look*.”

“Stars.” Mitsukake murmured, his eyes flickering with emotion as he nodded his head. “Tamahome is back where he belongs. With all of us — in the sky over Kounan.”

“I hope he realises what we do for him and Miaka.” Nuriko sighed, tut-tutting as he glanced at his hands. “This is inconvenient… and I was hoping I’d get to hug everyone goodbye this time, too.”

“What are you talking about?” Tasuki looked blank, and Nuriko held his palms up to his companion.

“Can’t you see it, you blockhead?” He demanded. “We’ve restored the stars, but it took our strength. We’re spirits again.”

“Shit…” Tasuki faltered, and Chichiri tut-tutted, shaking his head.

“Is that all you can say? In front of a child, too?” He teased. “We knew this would happen, though — didn’t we? That them being here… it was only temporary. If the stars are back how they should be…”

“Chichiri! Genrou! There are guards outside the shrine!”

Before he could finish his sentence, there was a pounding on the door, and Chichiri frowned, moving forwards to slide it back. Anzu tumbled onto him, anxiety in her dark eyes as she met his gaze.

“They’re outside.” She said breathlessly. “Tamatama is trying to hold the door, but I don’t think he’s strong enough. I’m sorry… I know we can’t… but I didn’t want…”

She faltered, taking in the appearance of Hotohori and the other Seishi, and she bit her lip.

“You’re ghosts.” She whispered. “You really are… going, aren’t you?”

“I can’t hold this any longer!” Tamatama’s voice came from the outer sanctum, followed by the sound of the door being forced back. Men spilled into the shrine, weapons primed as they cast suspicious, angry gazes around them, a couple of them looking frightened by the strange sign they had seen over Kounan’s royal palace.

“What do we do now?” Tasuki’s fingers were already twitching towards his tessen, although inwardly he knew that right now he had no strength to use it. “Can’t we hat-hop outta here? Chichiri…?”

“No good, you know. I’m spent.” Chichiri shook his head. “I used

all of my magic to weave that spell, and it wasn't easy, holding so much together. I can't connect a spell to anything right at the moment… we're just going to have to talk our way out of it."

"With four ghosts and a hole in the ceiling?" Tasuki demanded. "*How*?"

"They might not be able to see us." Hotohori reflected. "If we're ghosts again."

"Anzu could." Tasuki pointed out. "And it's goin' to be hard to explain why we blew a new entrance in the roof."

"Explain yourselves!" The man at the head of the guard's procession pushed Anzu out of the way at that moment, facing Chichiri and Tasuki with his sabre bared. He stopped dead at the sight of the Suzaku warriors, then his gaze hardened.

"Chichiri-sama! Tasuki-sama! You have overstepped the line!"

Chichiri sighed, and Tasuki could see him considering for a moment. Then he nodded, stepping forward and reaching out a hand to lower the guard's weapon.

"Lady Houki granted Tasuki and I free range of this palace, to do Suzaku's work." He said softly. "To save Kounan… isn't that why we're here?"

"Even so, infiltrating the palace and vandalising the holy shrine of the God himself…" The guard said slowly. "Such things are surely in defiance of the God's status — and of the status of this palace and the Prince and Dowager Empress that reside within it! And to so defile the final resting place of Lord Saihitei — I am sure Yotaigo-sama did not give the order for you to come in here and…"

"Stand down."

Hotohori's imperative tones cut through the man's protestations, and despite himself, the guard quaked as the former Emperor stood forward, holding up his hands. Though he had lost his physical form, his body still glittered with the red energy of the beast God, and his character blazed on his neck as he met the eyes of a man who had once served him, the look of the Emperor truly in his gaze.

"Or will you speak against your former Emperor, Saihitei?" He continued softly. "This is Suzaku's work. You have no reason to be here."

"S… S… Saihitei-sama." More than one guard paled, and the men who had grasped a hold of Anzu and Aidou to prevent them escaping

loosed their grips, clearly debating whether or not it would be prudent to flee.

Hotohori tilted his head slightly, an imperious expression on his face.

“But you… you… you’re dead, Heika. I mean… you can’t…”

“To serve Suzaku, the God of rebirth, I can do anything that it takes.” Hotohori said gravely. “To protect my widow and my son, I can rise even from the grave. It is my will that this deed be done here tonight. Do you respect that, as a command from the Suzaku warrior Hotohori, once Emperor and protector of this realm? Or does my death render my word and my will irrelevant?”

This was too much for many of the retinue, who turned on their heel and fled, the idea of making an arrest forgotten in the terror of being so reprimanded by the forbidding figure of their former master. Soon only the guard in charge remained, and he dropped to his knees, staring up at Hotohori in uncertain fear.

“S… s… sire…”

Hotohori eyed him for a moment, then smiled, resting a spectral hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Houki-sama doesn’t need to know that I was here.” He said softly. “For her sake, and for my son’s — they don’t need to worry about me. I have done the duty Suzaku created me to do. Kounan is safe. You won’t see me again. Go, follow your men and tell them that tonight’s events were the result of a stray bolt of lightning across the southern sky.”

The man swallowed hard, nodding his head slowly. Then, his nerve gave out, and he scrambled to his feet, his weapon abandoned as he fled in the direction his men had gone. Hotohori sighed, rubbing his temples.

“Such a nusiance.” He said, his voice pained. “Even though I have given him such instruction, I’m sure that Houki will come to know… that I was here.”

“Then she’ll know you came to save Kounan.” Chichiri said softly. “Just as you said.”

“Hotohori-sama.” Anzu breathed, staring up at the spectral form of the Emperor as she did so. “You were… you must’ve been… such a strong Emperor. When you… when you were ruler of Kounan.”

“I don’t know.” Hotohori admitted. “But… that’s secondary to my

role as Hotohori, now. Saihitei is buried here, beneath the statue. And Hotohori will go to be reborn… at least, I… assume so. We… are still here."

"You are. But not for long."

A fresh voice interrupted them and as one they turned, warriors and companions alike to meet the grave gaze of an elderly woman, robed in the finest fabrics as she eyed each of them with a beady, searching stare.

"*Taiitsukun*!" Nuriko exclaimed.

"Shit, don't scare us like that! Give us some warning — I thought you were history!" Tasuki leapt backwards, almost knocking his sister flying as he did so.

"Taii… tsu… kun?" Anzu looked blank. "What… this old woman is…"

"The Emperor of the Heavens, you know. The Controller of our world. Which means… we did it. We were right." Chichiri said with a smile, even as a small, teal-haired girl flickered into view at his side, leaping and jumping around him as she examined him for injuries. "And Nyan Nyan — you too. I'm glad to see you — does that mean Taikyoku-zan is restored, too?"

"All better, all better!" Nyan Nyan nodded her head, pigtails bobbing. "Heal you now… heal you!"

"My warriors of Suzaku. Men of the south." Taiitsukun hesitated for a moment, then she smiled, giving a rather sinister, grotesque effect. "I'm proud of you. All of you. Without guidance from me or the presence of the Miko — you've learnt your own significance in this world, and helped to protect it from the greatest danger. Nothing can exist without faith, after all."

"Well, you could have given us some warning that Tama going to Miaka's world was going to screw with ours." Tasuki said flatly. "We've been chasing all over the place — a hint woulda been nice, before you dropped us back in Kounan."

"Sometimes things happen that surprise all of us." Taiitsukun admitted. "But you… your strength and belief in each other and in absent friends — has proved to be enough. You've learnt the lessons of your past battles, and I'm glad of it. All of you, in death or in life, are beyond the men you started out as — I'm sure you all know that."

"Taiitsukun — the North country?" Mitsukake asked anxiously, and

Taiituskun smiled.

“The storms have receded, and the bad weather is at an end.” She said softly. “And the town of Choukou no longer resides under a demon’s curse. I know you worry about the river too, Mitsukake — you and Chichiri both. But you have my word — the people are safe, thanks to you.”

She gestured upwards.

“The sky is complete.” She added. “You have all done well.”

“So what happens now?” Nuriko asked hesitantly. “Do we… are we… leaving?”

“Tasuki and Chichiri must stay here.” Taiitsukun said quietly. “Their work as Suzaku’s warriors is, for the time being, at an end. They have lives to lead in this world, and now, they must learn to lead them — whatever path that takes them down. Nyan Nyan has healed you, both of you — your strength has returned to you.”

“Does this mean we’ll stop being Tasuki and Chichiri, and just be Genrou and Hou Jun now, then?” Tasuki asked, and Taiitsukun smiled, shaking her head.

“Look at your arm.” She said softly, and Tasuki did so, pulling back his jacket sleeve as he eyed the blazing character on his skin.

“You will always have that, to remind you of who you truly are.” She continued. “Chichiri, you also. Your celestial selves are part of who you are — a fundamental part of your characters and your personalities. You can’t shed them any more than you can shed your memories or your other ties. But you will be able to return to the worlds you left, before Miaka came to Kounan. This is your destiny — to return to life, and live it.”

Her eyes twinkled strangely, and Tasuki felt slightly queasy at the effect.

“After all, not all warriors are destined to die for the Miko.” She added. “Some are meant to live, guiding that Miko — and to take a place in the world she came to save.”

“And us?” Hotohori asked. “This will be the last time we fight in these forms, won’t it?”

“You will come with me, back to Taikyoku-zan.” Taiitsukun nodded her head. “And this time, you truly will be reborn. As befits the men who gave their lives in service to this country.”

“I guess then it’s time we said our goodbyes too, Tasuki.” Chichiri said evenly. “Who knows if or when the Suzaku Shichi Seishi will cross paths again? Tamahome probably won’t return to this world fully until Sukunami Taka dies, after all. Nuriko, Mitsukake, Chiriko, Hotohori-sama will all have new identities, memories and lives. This is pretty much the end of the story, as it were… so if you want to say anything to anyone, say it now.”

Tasuki glanced at each of the spectral Seishi in turn, a lump rising in his throat once more as he took in each of them and what they had meant to him over the course of the past few years. Nuriko, with his quirky sense of mischief and his light, teasing humour. Chiriko’s quiet intelligence and fraternal friendship. Mitsukake’s gentle spirit and soft, unjudgemental demeanour. And Hotohori, Emperor of Kounan, who had fought alongside him as an equal and who had borne the burdens of Kounan’s war on his own shoulders.

“I guess there ain’t nothing much to say.” He said at length. “I’m not good at speeches, anyway. Jus’…good luck, I s’pose. And… and I’m glad I… I *was* Tasuki, in the end. An’ that I… I knew you all.”

“Tasuki’s right.” Chichiri said gravely. “I think we’ve gone beyond words, really. We all know what we’re all thinking and feeling. But that your next lives are happy and successful — one day we’ll all be a team again, even if it is several lives in the future. Knowing that makes me realise that life is a strong thing, you know — and so… so take care of yourselves. All of you. Till that day comes.”

“Chichiri…” Mitsukake’s lips flickered into a faint smile, then he nodded.

“It’s as you say.” He reflected. “Life moves on, constantly. And so do we.”

“Then this is it.” Nuriko murmured, even as Taiitsukun began her spell to transport them to the mystical mountain top. “Let’s hope that the rebirth goes better this time around, huh? Live well, both of you — Tasuki, try and learn a little tact before you die, huh? And Chichiri… do something for yourself too, from time to time. Don’t let him make you run round fixing his messes!”

“*Nuriko*!” Tasuki glared at his friend, but Nuriko merely winked at him, raising his hand in a casual, carefree wave. Then, with a flare of light they were gone, and the shrine was once more silent.

For a moment, noone spoke. Then Tasuki sank to the floor, closing his eyes as his emotions overwhelmed him. Unashamedly he wept for the friends he knew now he would likely not see again as Genrou, and

as he did so, he felt gentle arms slip themselves around his body, holding him tightly. His eyes snapped open as he gazed up at Anzu in disbelief, but she merely offered him a shy smile, shaking her head.

"It's hard to say goodbye." She whispered. "But you're not alone, Genrou. I promise. None of us are. Not any more."

Tasuki faltered, then he sighed, the impulse to push her away fading as he digested both her words and the tender understanding in her tones.

"I guess… I know that." He murmured, realising as he did so that instead of putting him on edge, her touch this time had brought him comfort. "And I have a mountain to get back to… it's just… like you said. Hard. That's all. To let 'em all jus' vanish an' be stuck here, knowin' we won't see them again."

"On the subject of where we are, we *should* probably get going too, you know." Chichiri reflected levelly, although there was emotion glittering in his own ruby eye. "I want to go north and see that the river really is all right — and this isn't the best place to be, considering the guards may come back after they get over their fright. Nyan Nyan has healed my magic enough for us to shift through my *kasa*— and Tamatama-san, I did promise to take you home."

"No… it's all right." Tamatama shook his head, getting to his feet. "I… I'm going to stay in Eiyou. At least for now. I have someone to find, and I did want to visit Kourin's family — even if I can't tell them about any of this. I feel even more strongly now that I should go, if just to know the people who gave her life… she was an important friend to me, in the end. It seems the right thing to do."

"Aidou? Anzu? What about you? And Tasuki — are you coming north?" Chichiri asked the bandit quizzically. "Or is this where we part ways, too?"

"I'll come north." Tasuki shook his head. "I jus' lost four of my best friends in one sweep, Chichiri — you ain't gettin' away that easily."

"All right." Chichiri nodded his head, relief flickering in his good eye. "I rather hoped that'd be the case, you know… I don't feel like being on my own either, just yet. So we'll both go back to the farmhouse… and get some rest. It's late… and after today, we probably all need it."

"After the last few days." Anzu got to her feet, pulling Tasuki to his and then turning to cast Chichiri a smile. "I go wherever Genrou does, though. That's decided, now… I'm coming too."

“Aidou?” Chichiri shot Tasuki’s sister a questioning look, and Aidou started as if from a reverie. She stared at him for a moment, then smiled.

“I promised I’d keep an eye on Shun’u until he got back to the mountain.” She said lightly. “So that’s what I’ll do. If you’re going back to the river, I suppose I am too.”

“Then everyone brace themselves.” Chichiri lifted his *kasa*, gripping his *shakujou* tightly as he prepared his spell. “Let’s go.”

Daybreak.

Above the banks of the Shouryuu the sun was already climbing high in the sky as Anzu made her way carefully down the uneven landscape towards the water’s edge, pausing at the riverside as she gazed thoughtfully down on the glittering surface.

“The water brings life and death. The river helps people survive and takes their lives, too.” She murmured. “There were so many things, in the past few days, that seemed impossible to get through. But we did… we did. And now it’s over — it almost seems a shame. I’m going to miss travelling with Chichiri and Aidou. And… and Hotohori-sama.”

She frowned, raising her gaze to the sky at this. The stars were no longer visible, but she knew that somewhere beyond the blue, the constellation of the sea serpent glittered among it’s fellows, and a faint smile touched her lips.

“Good luck in your new life, and thank you for helping me in mine.” She whispered. “Seishuku-san.”

“Well, Taiitsukun was right.”

A voice came from behind her and she turned, seeing the bandit standing behind her, his arms folded across his chest as he cast her a grin. He was not wearing his jacket, and from the edges of his shirt sleeves Anzu could make out the faint glittering of the ‘wings’ symbol. At the sight of it, she returned his smile, nodding her head.

“The river didn’t flood and noone died.” She said frankly. “I’m glad. Especially for Chichiri — I know it must have made him think of his own family.”

“It ain’t so bad, if it does. Memories ain’t somethin’ to be ashamed of.” Tasuki reflected, reaching down to haul her to her feet. “Don’t sit so close, you moron. You’ll fall in an’ then you’ll be in trouble.”

“You wouldn’t help me?” Anzu eyed him in hurt surprise, and Tasuki snorted.

“Yeah, as much as a boulder would.” He said frankly. “I’m a mountain man. I don’t swim.”

“You… don’t…”

“No, I don’t.” Tasuki shook his head. “So do as I say and stop being silly. Just because it looks safe…”

“I know. Don’t trust in things so easily. People, too.” Anzu sighed, brushing the dust off her skirt as she nodded her head. “Kouji said that, after Bouka tried to rape me. That I trust too easily. But… but I’m working on it. I mean, I don’t want to be too jaded, either. That would be wrong… because there are people I can trust. Like… like you.”

“Bouka, huh?” Tasuki’s eyes narrowed, and Anzu was aware that the symbol on his arm had begun to glitter with renewed strength. She sighed, shaking her head.

“I don’t want you to do anything to him.” She said softly. “Kouji dealt with it, and besides… besides, I don’t want to make trouble for you. But… I do want to come back to the mountain. And noone will respect me there, as any kind of a bandit, if I’m always running to you or Kouji to be saved. So… so it’s all right. Don’t hurt Bouka on my account… I don’t think he’ll get a second chance to hurt me.”

She smiled faintly.

“People do make mistakes, after all.” She added. “Maybe he’ll learn from it.”

“Doubtful.” Tasuki’s lip curled. “Some men are just scum from the start. I should blast him good and hard with the tessen… Hakurou would’ve never stood for it and nor will I.”

“Hakurou was important to you, wasn’t he?” Anzu reflected, and Tasuki nodded.

“I still intend to be like him. One day.” He admitted. “If I can… that was what I wanted to do, when I came to the mountain. Be the kind of man he was. I jus’ expected him to live longer… an’ Suzaku’s work complicated things. He always knew what I was — that I had this, on my arm. But he still gave me the tessen anyway… he still believed in me. So I gotta repay that belief… and go back to Reikaku-zan an’ be Kashira like he was. Or better. If I can. He’s a pretty big shadow to live up to — jus’ ask Kouji. All the men who remember him — they all

speak well of Hakurou."

"He might have been." Anzu pursed her lips, considering this. "But I don't think you need to… to be like him, Genrou. You're your own kind of man. Your own kind of Kashira. And you… you've nothing to worry about. You've more than proved what you're capable of… that's why he gave you the tessen, wasn't it? I've heard Kouji talk enough about you and about the things you've done, in the past. I don't think Hakurou had any doubts about the kind of leader you'd be… and that's who you have to be now. Reikaku-zan's Genrou, rather than Suzaku's Tasuki."

"When did you turn into Chichiri? *Are* you Chichiri, pullin' a spell on me?" Tasuki blinked at her, and Anzu laughed, shaking her head.

"I'm not, silly. I've just been thinking." She said, amused. "I promise. That's all. This trip's taught me a lot of things too. And I think maybe I've got to know you better than I thought I did, when I came here from Sairou. Even after what happened two years ago, well, a lot can happen in that space of time apart. And I don't suppose, when I was a fifteen year old brat… I really stopped and thought about things as much as I do now. Nursing Karin, surviving on what we did — I guess it made me grow up more quickly than I had done before. And since I came here, that's carried on. That night with the byouma… will stay with me for a long time. I suppose it was then I realised I'd become stronger somehow."

"Hrm." Tasuki frowned, and for a moment he didn't speak, turning to gaze out across the river. Silence fell between them, and Anzu bit her lip, sending him a sidelong glance as she tried to work out what was going through his mind.

"You… *are* going to take me back to Reikaku-zan with you, aren't you?" She asked hesitantly after a while, toying absently with her fingers as she gauged his expression. "Genrou? Now that everything is… finished… *are* you going to let me stay?"

"You *really* want to be a bandit, huh?" Tasuki pursed his lips, sending her a keen glance. "That much? Even though one of the guys there tried to rape you already — you really want to go back?"

"Yes." Anzu nodded her head resolutely. "I 'll learn to take care of myself — I believe that more than ever, now. Thanks to Hotohori-sama, I can hold a blade and I'll keep practicing — I'll believe in myself. And I won't be silly enough to get into positions like that again. It's what I want, Genrou. Will you let me come?"

"Guess there's nothing else for it, then." Tasuki shugged. "If that's

how you feel. After all, I guess… on some levels, I owe you my life. So I can't really say no, can I? Considerin' that."

Anzu's eyes lit up, and she grinned.

"Thank you, Kashira-sama." She said sincerely. "I promise you won't regret it."

Tasuki eyed her for a moment, then a wolfish grin crossed his face.

"I've been thinkin' too." He hazarded. "Maybe I do need to reconsider this whole, you know, hatin' women thing."

"You think so?" Anzu returned the smile with a mischievous one of her own. "Any reason why?"

Tasuki glanced at her, then he spread his hands.

"I'm a man. After a while, it's hard to ignore." He said frankly. "I can hate 'em all I want, but thing is though, I can't help but notice them, these days. You're no soft touch, Anzu… you *have* got stronger an' I know you'll survive Reikaku-zan, if it's what you put you mind to doin'. But dammit, you're still a girl. An' that's hard to forget. Even when you tie your hair back an' dress in bandit's clothin'. You still got things that men notice… if you know what I mean."

Anzu laughed at his blunt assessment, nodding her head.

"I don't try and hide them." She admitted. "I wanted you to accept me as a bandit, Genrou. But as a woman, too. I'm not afraid of loving you, if you don't love me back. I can live with that — it doesn't matter to me, now. But I don't want you to look at me and think I'm one of the guys. I never have. So it's all part of the master plan… I am a woman. And I'm glad you know that… that you, well, you like having me around, even knowing that."

Tasuki's eyes narrowed.

"This is another girl manipulation game, ain't it." He said softly. "That's somethin' you girls always do — trick an' play around, foolin' a guy into thinkin' one thing an' really tryin' to achieve another. Is that what this is? Are you plottin' something I should know about, before I take you back to my mountain?"

"Only to make you notice me more and more." Anzu said coquettishly. "As a woman and as a bandit. I'm going to try my hardest to be the best I can at both things. Because I don't see why you can't have a girl bandit in your team. And more, I *want* to be Kashira's woman. I'm not, at the moment. But it gives me something to aspire to. Girls don't let go so easy as guys, after all. And I promised

Reirei and Karin that I'd not give up on you. So that's the way it is. If you think that's me being sneaky, well, that's what I am. But girls will do almost anything for a guy they love. That;s the truth."

"Even shed tears over him." Tasuki murmured, and Anzu stared at him in surprise. Slowly she nodded, and Tasuki grinned, eying her sheepishly.

"Miaka said that to me." He admitted. "I never understood what the hell she really meant till now… well, I thought it was some stupid girl thing, and it didn't make sense. None of it made sense. But when I had that fever… when the demon was in me, you… you cried a lot. I remember that. You cried… a hell of a lot, because of me. Miaka said that girls cry when they're happy and when they're sad — and for the ones they love most. That true by you? Was she right — was that why you were cryin' so hard that night? Because I was sick, even though I was so harsh towards you?"

"Yes." Anzu agreed slowly. She bit her lip, then, "Genrou, do you… are you still thinking about Miaka-sama?"

"I think about her an' Tama all the time." Tasuki said evenly, and Anzu dropped her gaze.

"I see."

"Not like that!" Tasuki's eyes opened wide as he realised what he'd said. "Anzu, don't give me that look! I didn't mean… aw, hell, why do women always read six things into one basic sentence? I think about Miaka an' Tama because they're my friends and even if I never see 'em again, that's what they'll always be. Like Nuriko. Like Chiriko. Like his Highness an' Mitsukake. They're gone but they're still buddies… you understand? Allies. And I ain't gonna forget them so easily, just because they're not here now. That's all I meant. Don't start cryin' on me, all right?"

Anzu stared at him, then she smiled, dashing away the sprinkling of tears that had dampened her lashes for a moment. She nodded.

"I won't." She agreed. "And I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions. Maybe sometimes I feel I can't compare to Suzaku no Miko. That's all."

"Miaka is Tama's girl an' always was." Tasuki said frankly. "She was like my kid sister, but… that's all it was. An' I was intoxicated, when things happened. I don't know — I told you, I'm a man an' it jus' opened my eyes to why Kouji an' the rest are always so crazy about girls an' all of that shit. It… broke down my defences, but it

wasn't really me. Sure, I love Miaka. I won't pretend I don't. But that's because she's Suzaku no Miko. An' because she's a damn good friend."

He sent her a crooked smile.

"She was a weird girl. But a good friend." He added. "She believed in people strong as any guy I've ever met, an' I promised her too that I'd stop sayin' I hated women. Guess I lied about that, huh…?"

"You don't hate women." Anzu told him firmly. "You just don't know how to handle us. That's all."

"If girls were less sneaky an' more direct, I'd have a better time with them." Tasuki admitted. Anzu nodded.

"Well, I promise that I'll try and be direct, if that will help." She said softly. "Kashira."

Tasuki pursed his lips, looking all the more lupine as he surveyed her thoughtfully. Then he shook his head.

"I don't want to hear that from you." He said bluntly.

"What do you mean?" Anzu looked startled. "What don't you want to hear from me — I don't understand?"

"Kashira." Tasuki responded.

"But you said I could be a bandit. Didn't you?" Anzu was confused now, and Tasuki nodded.

"You can, an' you will. You are." He agreed. "But you've never called me it, an' I don't want you to start now. You call me Genrou, and stick with that. Okay? After all, it'd seem weird, otherwise."

"Oh. Okay." Anzu's cheeks pinkened at this, and she nodded her head. "Then I'll do that. If that's what you want. You are the boss."

"Chichiri says people can't belong to people." Tasuki looked uncharacteristically thoughtful, as he cast a glance across the landscape. "And that noone's perfect, so noone can be on their own. He talks a lot of crap, sometimes. I don't always get where he's comin' from. But on this one, I do. Hatin' women isn't easy when you realise you like 'em, an' behavin' like a lecherous ape ain't my style, so I suppose I've been afraid of myself a little, for a while. Likin' women — that ain't natural for me. But… damn, Anzu, two years is a long time. You were such a kid then…"

He faltered, falling silent, and Anzu hesitated, then stepped up beside him, slipping her arm through his as he sent her a surprised look.

“I was a girl.” She said softly. “Now I’m a woman. I’m almost eighteen, Genrou. I’m not a child any more.”

Tasuki nodded his head.

“You don’t need to tell me.” He said baldly. “I can see it for myself.”

Anzu laughed.

“I’m glad you can.” She teased. “It proves all my hard work has paid off a little, at the very least.”

Tasuki flexed his fingers thoughtfully, glancing at the flickering red mark that glittered on his forearm.

“This damn thing has got me into and out of a lot of trouble.” He murmured. “But Suzaku didn’t give any guidelines on how to deal with circus girls who infiltrate bandit camps.”

“You’re not Suzaku’s, now. You’re Reikaku-zan’s.” Anzu reminded him, and Tasuki grinned.

“I’m Suzaku’s *and* Reikaku-zan’s.” He corrected her. “So long as I have this on my arm, I’m still a Seishi. And so long as I remember the others, we’re still a team. But you’re right. Goin’ back to the mountain is the thing to do, now.”

Anzu nodded. She bit her lip for a moment, then turned to face him, meeting his gaze with a serious one of her own.

“I’m sorry I kissed you, last time we were here by the river.” She said softly. “It was wrong of me to do. I shouldn’t have… not without knowing if you wanted me to or not. That’s no better, really, than what Bouka wanted to do to me.”

“Funny.” Tasuki’s lips twitched into a wicked, wolfish grin. “I was just thinking about that.”

At the intent in his voice, Anzu’s cheeks reddened further, and she dropped her gaze, but Tasuki slipped a finger beneath her chin, raising her face to his once more.

“Don’t get shy. It don’t suit you.” He said softly. “I don’t like girls who don’t have a little faith in their convictions.”

“Genrou?” Anzu stared at him uncertainly, and Tasuki shrugged.

“I’m guessing you owe me.” He said lightly. “For then, you owe me good. And I’m a bandit. So I’m gonna collect.”

Before she knew what was happening, he had bent his head to hers,

kissing her firmly and decidedly on the lips. Stunned, Anzu did not fight against it, as her heart pounded in her ears and she slid her arms around his body, her mind in a whirling haze. As they separated, she stared at him in disbelief, and Tasuki eyed her ruefully, touching his lips for a moment, then shrugging his shoulders.

“We’re even.” He said casually. “Shall we go?”

“Genrou…” Tears glittered once more on Anzu’s cheeks, and she flung her arms around him properly, burying her head against his chest as he stared at her in bewildered consternation.

“Hey, what’s with you? You’re crying!? Anzu…?”

“It’s all right. It’s okay.” Anzu raised her eyes to his, offering him an affectionate smile as she did so. “It’s what Miaka-sama told you. We cry over the ones we love most… and we cry when we’re happy. I’m happy, Genrou. Even if you never do that again, I’m happy. You needn’t look so alarmed. It’s all all right.”

“Dammit, how the hell am I meant to know the difference?” Tasuki demanded, and despite herself, Anzu laughed.

“I’ll teach you.” She suggested playfully. “When we get back to Reikaku-zan. I’ll teach you everything you ever need to know about women — if you’ll let me.”

“I might be better off not knowin’.” Tasuki muttered, but there was a flicker of something in his gaze that made Anzu’s heart swell with warmth.

“I guess we’ll see. We’ve plenty of time to find out.” She said comfortably.

“This is cosy.” Chichiri’s voice from behind them startled the two apart, and Tasuki sent the monk a dark look, folding his arms across his chest.

“You’ve been waitin’ there for a while, haven’t you?” He demanded. “You’re as sneaky as any woman, Chichiri — you could’a told us you were there sooner!”

“I didn’t want to spoil the moment.” Chichiri said innocently. “Although I’m ashamed of you, Tasuki-kun — you should have sensed me, you know.”

“I had other things on my mind!”

“Yes, so I saw.” Chichiri’s dark red eye glittered with humour. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“Like hell you are.” Tasuki muttered, and the monk laughed.

“Aidou’s waiting, and she’s impatient to get back to your family and see how your father’s doing.” He said lightly. “If you want me to take you back to Reikaku-zan the quick way, we’re ready to go now, you know?”

“Then I guess we’re going.” Anzu squeezed Tasuki’s hand tightly, then loosed it, nodding her head. “Are you coming back with us, Chichiri? I mean, will you be staying at Reikaku-zan again this time?”

“For a day or two, maybe, but not forever. Three’s a crowd, so they say, and the mountain has enough potential gooseberries without my interference.” Chichiri laughed, and Tasuki shot him a murderous look.

“One more word and it’ll be sauteed monk on the mountain menu tonight.” He said bluntly, reaching up to tap the end of his tessen with his finger. “You’ve been warned.”

“Save your fire to defend Anzu’s honour.” Chichiri’s good eye sparkled as he glanced between the two. “She’s the kind of girl who’s going to attract attention… even if she can take care of herself, you’re gonna have to make sure your men know that she’s off limits, if she’s really going to stay on the mountain.”

“They’ll know.” Tasuki said evenly. “If they don’t already… they will. You needn’t worry about that.”

“Then we should go.” Chichiri offered Anzu a conspiratorial wink, and she returned it with a shy smile. “Back to Reikaku-zan, and normality — whatever *that* is for a Suzaku warrior!”

Chapter 25

Epilogue

Back in mountain country at last.

Tasuki gazed out across the horizon, his expression uncharacteristically thoughtful as he surveyed the territory Reikaku-zan presided over. It was another day, like any other day to the citizens of Souun and the villages below, but somehow, in that day, there was something different on the horizon.

Something intangible… and strong, pulling at his thoughts, and making him feel at ease.

“So, everything’s done with now, huh?”

At the sound of Kouji’s voice, Tasuki turned, casting his number two a grin as he gestured for the other man to sit down. Kouji did so, perching on a rock as he gazed down over the peaks and valleys that surrounded the blessed mountain.

“Somethin’ on your mind, Genrou?” He asked at length. Tasuki frowned, then shook his head.

“Jus’ thinking over what Nuriko said.” He responded slowly. “About livin’, and you know, all of that.”

“It’s not like you. Thinking, I mean.” Kouji observed, and Tasuki brought his fist down sharply towards his friend’s head at this. Kouji laughed, ducking out of the way.

“Too slow. You’re losing your edge, Kashira.” He teased. Tasuki grimaced at him, then grinned, shaking his head.

“So what about what Nuriko said? What pearl of wisdom did he drop into your brain, then, before he headed off into the sunset?” Kouji asked curiously. Tasuki’s expression became serious.

“That Chichiri an’ me, we’ve still got stuff to do. That’s why we’re still in this world, in these bodies, livin’ these lives.” He said, his tones uncharacteristically pensive. “He said that no matter what happens, we gotta live those lives doin’ the things we want to do. Not the things other people make us do. He said he never really knew himself, and he regretted that, so he wanted to start over, and try and make sure this time he doesn’t make that mistake. And he said that, now the

world is safe, Chichiri an' me — we gotta do the same thing. Without the Suzaku Seven, this time… but you know. Just bein' us."

"So what does that mean, then?" Kouji eyed him keenly. "That you're gonna ditch the tessen on me and ride off into the sunset, marry Anzu and become a dude like your pop?"

"Moron." This time Tasuki's fist did make contact, and Kouji winced, glaring at his friend mock indignantly. "Don't you know me at all yet? Like hell I'm gonna do a stupid thing like that. I'm Genrou, ain't I? I'm King of this hill. Why would I throw that away, when I'm finally where I wanted to be all the time?"

"So it hasn't gone to your head, then? All this Seishi business?" Kouji asked, rubbing his skull ruefully. Tasuki shook his head.

"Naw." He responded, holding out his arm as the symbol of the wings blazed brightly against his skin. "I am Tasuki — I mean, I'll always have that. And this, I think. I don't think it's gonna suddenly disappear now that the others have been reborn. From what Chiriko said, it's a permanent thing. Us, existing here… it has somethin' major to do with keeping this world alive. So in that sense, I'm still Tasuki an' I still will be, even when I die. But in this lifetime I'm Genrou too, and it's time I was Genrou full time again. Reikaku-zan was what I wanted when Hakurou-sama was alive, and it ain't changed. Just all fallen into it's proper place now. That's all. If Suzaku ever calls again — or Miaka, for that matter — I'm still here and I know what I gotta do. But for the time being, I'm gonna do what Nuriko said an' live my life as Genrou. That's all."

"I think you've been thinking too hard, or the sun's been getting to your puny brain." Kouji reflected. "What about Anzu in all of this? Are you going to turn your back on her too, now? I thought you and she had reached some kind of agreement."

"Anzu's a bandit too, now." Tasuki shook his head, a faintly sheepish look entering his bronze eyes. "She's proved herself to her kashira, so I ain't got a problem letting her stay."

"I'm sure you haven't." Kouji eyed him speculatively. "Genrou, tell me something, huh?"

"Mm?"

"Why is it always you that the girls fall for?"

"I guess it's just my charm, buddy. You can't match up to me, an' that's why I have the tessen." Tasuki grinned at his companion lazily, and this time it was Kouji's turn to swing a fist in the redhead's

direction.

“Stop being cocky, you jerk — who’s been running this joint for you for the past few years, huh? You ain’t settled down and been kashira consistantly for long enough to talk like that.”

“Ah, but I’m here now.” Tasuki seemed unphased. “To protect Reikaku-zan, jus’ like Hakurou-kashira always said.”

“Even with a woman around? You don’t hate them any more?” Kouji raised an eybrow.

“Well, Anzu’s an exception.” Tasuki admitted, shrugging his shoulders. “I guess any girl who’s able to put her life in danger for her boss has to have some merit — I mean, on those terms, she’s as good as a guy, so…”

He trailed off, and Kouji grinned, a knowing smile touching his lips as he patted his friend on the back.

“Bout time you grew up and started acting like a man. Especially now you’re leader, and all.” He said reflectively.

“What’s that supposed to mean, idiot?”

“If you can’t work it out, you’re the idiot.” Was Kouji’s crushing rejoinder. He got to his feet, holding out a hand to haul his friend up.

“Come on, Kashira. Let’s go back. We’ve a lot of things to do, now that the tessen is back full time at Reikaku-zan… we shouldn’t be wasting time here. Besides, I’m starving… it must be time to eat.”

“True.” Tasuki allowed himself to be hauled upright, nodding his head. “I’m coming.”

As they headed down the mountain towards the bandit base, Tasuki paused for a moment, casting a brief glance up at the sky. Kouji paused, turning to send him a quizzical look.

“Genrou?”

“I think they’re all right. The others.” Tasuki said quietly, his tones pensive. “Today feels like the day somethin’ new is beginning… this time for real.”

“You talk a lot of crap, you know that?”

“Hey, that ain’t any way to speak to your boss — do you want me to fry you with this thing?” Tasuki wielded his tessen warningly, and Kouji laughed.

“It’s good to have you back on the mountain, Genrou.” He said

sincerely. “Now get a move on, before there’s no food left for either of us!”

The sky was cloudy that morning, and a cool wind whipped around the charred remains of the eastern village, disturbing the soft ash and debris that still littered the now deserted settlement. Since the fire, few of the villagers had even tried to come back for more than to find cherished belongings, and as a result, the land lay empty, as if it were one of the villages devastated by war.

As Chichiri stood there, his gaze falling on the blackened buildings, a chill touched his heart and he frowned, forcing it away. The memories of the battles against Kutou and the destroyed villages were ones he knew he’d never forget — not all of his memories as a Suzaku warrior carried a sense of happiness.

“But even so, there’s little to actually regret.” He reflected, glancing up at the sky. “I can’t see the stars, but I know they’re there. All of them, now. Crafted by the fact we’re all still connected, no matter what happens. The bonds we forged with Miaka are stronger than anything, and they bind Kounan together. When you think of that, you realise… every person’s life really is important. And sometimes people go their whole lives without knowing why they were born. Tasuki and I — and all of our friends — we were the lucky ones. We know. And no matter where we are, as spirits or as human beings, we’ll always have that. Always.”

“I thought I heard someone else in the village.”

Chichiri started, swinging around to face the speaker, as she cast him a rueful, droll smile. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that it’s you who’s come here, Hou Jun, and not my little brother.”

“Aidou.” Chichiri’s expression became a warm smile, and he nodded his head.

“I think Tasuki has a lot of other things on his plate.” He added. “But he and his bandits have done a lot to support the villagers who’ve left and gone elsewhere. Even bandits aren’t all rogues, you know — you should remember that, now.”

“I think I will. At least where Shun’u is concerned.” Aidou stepped carefully over the fallen timbers, lifting her cloak so that the edges didn’t trail in the ashy residue that still coated every surface. “As for this place — I doubt people will come back. Not yet, at least. Maybe in time — when families need somewhere new to go, and there’s land cheap and begging to be used. But for now, they’ve moved on. Life

demands it. There's no room in this world for sentiment."

"What about you, then?" Chichiri asked her keenly. "Why are you here, if that's the case?"

"Well, I think I've become foolish, like my idealistic younger brother." Aidou looked sheepish, shrugging her shoulders. "Mother and Father — they've gone to the next village to stay with one of my sisters and her family. It was all worked out — Pa's leg is healed now, thanks to Mitsukake-san's holy water, but in the final analysis he and Ma are both getting older. Shun'u had no interest in running the farm anyway, and, well, that's just the way it is. They've decided to cut their losses and leave… but me… somehow I'm drawn back here. Even though I know it's stupid — I think that I might stay."

"On your own?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Aidou said pragmatically. "I'm twenty four, near enough. I'm not a little girl and I'm able to take care of myself. Besides, I have noone to support. It won't be easy, to begin with — but I think I'm ready to branch out and see whether or not I can prove myself wrong. I want to find out if there really is life after death, even for a village as simple as this one."

"Why the change of heart?" Chichiri was curious. Aidou laughed.

"Well, I suppose travelling with you and Shun'u gave me a new look on things." She admitted. "For sure, I'm not such an idiot as he is, but then again, maybe that's a weakness in me. One thing I've come to see is that he never gives up, does he? If he believes… he never stops trying. He has energy enough to power all the stars in Kounan, not just those belonging to his constellation. And I've always called him to task on this or that, but at times on that journey, I was almost ashamed of myself. For trying to curb that energy — that life which, in the end, is part of the reason why everyone in this country is safe and alive today."

"We all want to hit Tasuki occasionally. Even me, and I try not to resort to violence more than I can help." Chichiri mused. "But you are right, you know. He has a knack for living… that's something I've learnt from him, I think. That you don't give up, no matter what gets thrown at you."

He settled himself down on a broken edged wall, gesturing for his companion to join him and she did so, carefully arranging her cloak so as to avoid soiling her clothing too much.

"So this will become your village now then?" He teased lightly.

“You’ll have all this space to yourself. Won’t it be overwhelming?”

“Yes, at first. I’ve never tried to do anything like this before.” Aidou nodded. “But I think, well, if those who protect this land can be reborn, and if they really *are* protecting this land, well, other things can rise from destruction as well. Suzaku is a phoenix, isn’t he? If this is his land, it must be possible. So I’ll do it. I’m game to try. And we’ll see how it goes.”

“Somehow I think you’ll manage it.” Chichiri offered her a grin. “You’re not a weak woman, Aidou… you and your brother, you share that trait.”

“Well, I suppose he had to have something of mine rub off on him, considering.” Aidou chuckled. “Perhaps I can say for the first time ever I understand my brother, though. Which is progress in itself, I think. And I don’t intend on asking him for help with rebuilding the village, you know — I’m not looking to rely on him or anyone to help me do this. But I do know he’s there, and I also know he’d come — if I asked him to.”

“Yes. He would.” Chichiri reflected. “Tessen blazing at top speed, he’d be there.”

Aidou was silent for a moment, then,

“That young girl will sort him out. She’s stronger than she looks, at first glance.” She decided. “He may not realise it yet, but he’s taken in a girl who knows her own mind, and probably his better than he ever will. She’ll be good for him — when he’s old enough in spirit to properly appreciate it.”

She tilted her head, eying him quizzically.

“And you?” She asked. “Will you stay at Reikaku-zan, now? Or will you be off to your own home village, to see whether or not you can rebuild your life there?”

“My village isn’t quite like yours, you know.” Chichiri shook his head. “Shouryuu-gawa’s flood was years ago. The wounds are no longer fresh — besides, people do still live there. People have migrated and moved, especially since the war with Kutou. It’s a very different village now, I suppose. I could go back, but there’d be no real reason to stay there. The things and people I knew are gone, and I’ve already been away too long to be a part of the rebuilding. So no. I won’t go back there. At least, I may go pay respects from time to time, to Hikou, Koran and my family… but if I do, I won’t linger.”

He grimaced ruefully, his finger going absently to the scar that still

wound sharply across his left eye.

“The people there are discomfitted by this.” He added. “Because it’s a reminder of past tragedy and the fact that the river could always flood again in the future. Besides, I know it’s not attractive to look at. I don’t want to scare any small children, and the mask makes me feel like a stranger in my own home. It..it’s Chichiri’s mask, you know… I don’t think it’s Ri Hou Jun’s.”

“So where will you go, then?” Aidou questioned.

“The beauty of my life is that I’m not tied anywhere, you know?” Chichiri shrugged complacently. “In some ways, Taikyoku-zan has been the closest thing to ‘home’ since the Shouryuu flood — but I don’t think that, with Suzaku’s work completed, that’s a place I can really go to now. I’m still Chichiri, but I *am* also Ri Hou Jun. And Ri Hou Jun has no place on a holy mountain.”

His eyes flickered with humour.

“I’m a terrible monk, you know.” He admitted. “I do all of the travelling and not much of the praying. I use the *shakujou* to cast my spells and I use my spiritual power as Chichiri — but I should probably be ashamed of myself, dressing this way when I’ve no real intention to live the lifestyle properly. Being a monk was just an excuse not to deal with the aftermath of the flood, or to have to put down roots or any of those things. But I like to travel, and to see places. So when I get restless again, I suppose, there’ll always be new land for me to explore. For now, I think I’ll head north. After everything, I feel that I ought to go to Hokkan, and the mountains there again. Nuriko is the only Seishi not buried in Kounan, and even though he’ll be reborn now, I think I should pay him a visit… and say a proper, formal goodbye. This time, after all, I really won’t be seeing him face to face again. After that, I’ll probably stop by the others, too. Just as closure. To let them know — if they can know — that Tasuki and I won’t forget about them, even if their rebirth means they have to forget about us. Tasuki won’t think to do it, even if his heart’s in the right place. So I’ll do it. Just to make sure.”

Aidou was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she nodded, offering him a grin.

“Well, if you ever need a place to stay near Reikaku-zan when you come back to Kounan, I’m sure there’ll be space in my village for a thousand travelling monks.” She said evenly. “So keep it in mind.”

Chichiri eyed her in surprise, and at his gaze, a faint blush rose in Aidou’s cheeks. She got to her feet, pulling her cloak more tightly

around her body.

“I shouldn’t be sitting around here doing nothing.” She reflected. “Shun’u’s bad habits are rubbing off on me too much of late — but if I’m going to make any life come back to this village, I’ve got no time to spare. Good luck on your journey, Hou Jun. No doubt we’ll meet again — my brother thinks a lot of you, and I’m sure you’ll visit Reikaku-zan at some point in the future, even if it isn’t right away.”

She turned towards the rubble-scattered pathway that led to the ruined wreckage of the Kou family home, and for a moment Chichiri just stared after her. Then he smiled, flicking his *kasa* off his head and glancing at it thoughtfully.

“You know, I’ll keep that in mind.” He called out, and at his voice, Aidou turned, offering him a smile. She nodded.

“I promise not to make you do chores.” She said lightly. “But I will hold you to it. You’re more responsible a man than Shun’u — and I like a man to keep his word.”

Her eyes twinkled slightly as she said this, and Chichiri laughed, tilting his head in acknowledgement.

“Then you can count on seeing me soon.” He said softly. “When I get back from my pilgrimage — I’ll come see how you’re getting on. And you know, I’m not afraid of getting my hands dirty. I can’t do anything for my own village, but maybe I can help with yours — when I come back.”

“Then it’s a deal.” Aidou said firmly. Chichiri eyed her for a moment, then he twitched his hat again, drawing on his spiritual powers as he transferred himself across time and space to the frozen mountain top where Nuriko had given his life so many years before.

As he paced across the snow towards the tall, wooden branch that stood as sentry to the final resting place of one of Kounan’s protectors, his mind flitted back to their adventures as Suzaku warriors, and the things that he had learnt.

“I’m glad that you’ll all finally have the chance to make that new start, you know?” He murmured, even as he brought his fingers before his face in the unfamiliar ritual of genuine prayer. “All of you deserve it. And Tasuki and I, we’ll see you again, you know. It might not be in this life time, or the next. But we’re all still a part of Kounan and a part of Suzaku. So one day, we will. I’m sure of that. Till then, we’ll do our best to fulfil all the things left for us to do — whatever those things are. And even if we forget these adventures, somehow I don’t

think we'll ever really fully forget one another."

For a moment he stood there, eyes closed as he reflected on the events of the past few years. Then, without a word, he turned, twitching his hat once more as he left the barren landscape. As the chill wind blew across Hokkan's mountains, only the footsteps of a lone stranger in the snow indicated that anyone had been to the peak that day.

And yet, somewhere in the furthest reaches of existance, a spirit smiled as he prepared to relinquish the last grips on his old life.

"*Thank you, Chichiri.*" He murmured. "*And I'm sure I'll see you all again soon.*"

—-Owari——